

**The Book as metaphor for the female self; a visual
investigation through the medium of the artist's book.**

by

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts**

**School of Art
University of Tasmania
June 2009**

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Leonie Oakes

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'L J Oakes'.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Llewellyn Negrin and Milan Milojevic for their guidance and support throughout this research. I am indebted to the School of Art, Graduate Research Office and Head of School, Noel Frankham for the opportunity to undertake this research.

I would also like to thank Bernie Carr, Mary Eckhardt, Sheila Alati and Gilbert Bantoft for generously providing their time and expertise. I am grateful to numerous other friends for sustenance, time and support.

I wish to thank Annie, Alice, Bell and Janelle for enduring long hours giving a face and body to my work.

I would also like to acknowledge the inspiration and humanity that has been passed on to me by Patricia Scott and Jonathan Holmes throughout my academic career.

Without the love and support of both my mother Janelle Oakes and my friend Jill Griffin this research would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT

One of the primary aims of my project is to consider how the book can be used visually as a vehicle to express the self and the female body. The impetus for this investigation came from my own interest in books and the stories that they hold. As my investigation progressed it became a self portrait, a way to both reveal and conceal my own story. The story of my chronic disease gave me a way to pull apart and reconstruct what a book could be. I have considered the notion that traumatic experience can manifest internally and physically emerge like a hidden text unfolding.

The project outlines some of the history of the book, cultural associations of the book with women and the development of the artists' book. I look at how the physicality and language associated with the book has similarities with the female body.

To inform my investigation I examined the work of artists who primarily address the related themes of the body, the book and the female self. I particularly looked at Paula Rego, Johanna Drucker, Nancy Spero, Audrey Niffenegger and Sally Smart who all make direct reference to their own stories using the idea of the book. I also drew on the writings of Johanna Drucker and Keith Smith who have both written extensively about the artists' book. Alberto Manguel's *History of Reading* and Stephen Bollman's book, *Reading Woman*, particularly Karen Joy Fowler's thoughts in her foreword about women reading, were also significant to my research.

My visual investigation employed strategies of deconstruction and reconstruction of books, photographs and text. I examined Elizabethan portraits of women with books and Victorian photographic portraits, medical and anatomical drawings, old fashioned books on etiquette, fairy tales and revisited my family album. I reconfigured these sources to make a story that is more personal to myself, turning the library I was given into a library that better expresses myself. However, the project is neither cathartic nor nostalgic.

In the final submission I present books as sculpture, as wearable objects, as props, as images and all as vehicles for the story of my physical and emotional traumas. Altogether, the work reveals a fragmented and broken text, giving glimpses of my past rather than a full disclosure of the actual story.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary aims of my project is to consider how the book can be used visually as a vehicle to express the self and the female body. The impetus for this investigation came from my own interest in books and the stories that they hold.

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As my investigation progressed it became a self portrait, a way to both reveal and conceal my own story. The story of my chronic disease gave me a way to pull apart and reconstruct what a book could be. During my childhood, experiences emotionally forced me inward and during my adulthood bodily experiences appeared to rupture forcing me onto the surface of my body.

With medication my skin became frail and thin. My body stretched and tore creating a linear text on the surface of my body. I have considered the notion that traumatic experience can manifest internally and physically emerge like a hidden text unfolding.

My visual investigation employed strategies of deconstruction and reconstruction of books, photographs and text. I examined Elizabethan portraits of women with books and Victorian photographic portraits, medical and anatomical drawings, old fashioned books on etiquette, fairy tales and revisited my family album. I reconfigured these sources to make a story that is more personal to myself, turning the library I was given into a library that better expresses myself. However, the project is neither cathartic nor nostalgic.

CHAPTER ONE

CENTRAL CONCERNS WITH THE PROJECT

I define a book relatively specifically, taking its primary function of recording, carrying and storing of information and for transmitting knowledge; from, for, of, and to the body as its defining role. I have expanded on this definition in a reflexive manner to include both body as book, book as body. In this context, the distinction between the book and the body often breaks down. My project seeks to emphasise this dissolve.

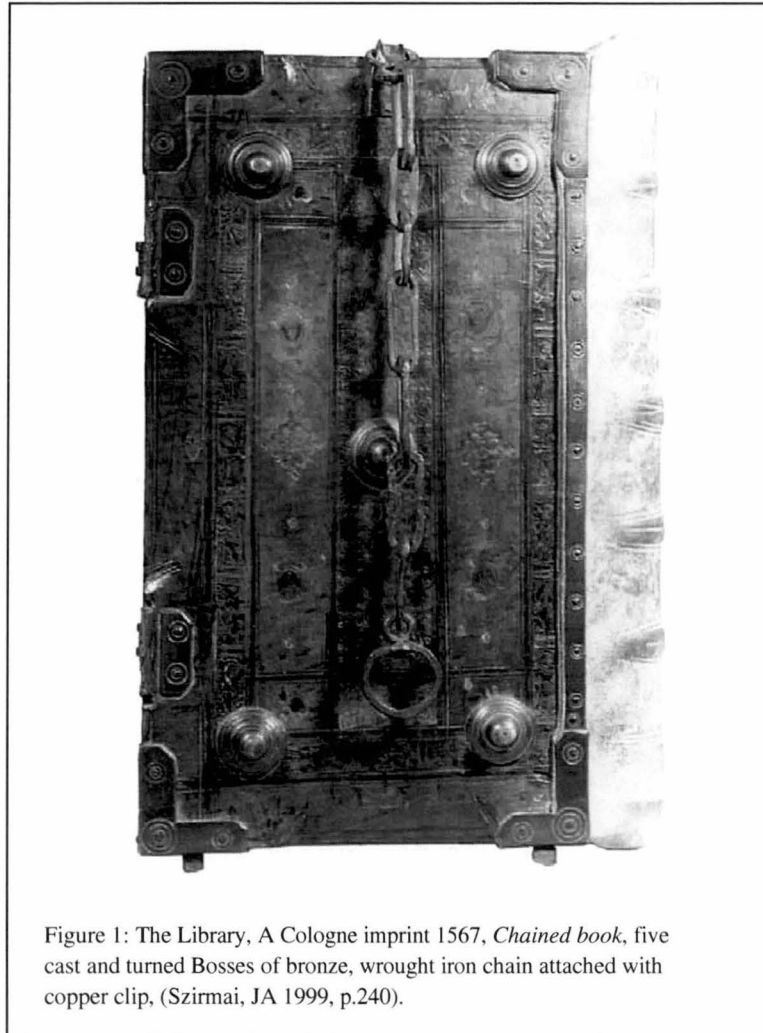
In order to investigate the visual representation of a hidden bodily text of my female self, I have researched the long standing history of the female body in relation to the book. This chapter discusses the idea of the book as a metaphor for the body and in turn for the female self. It then looks at the cultural function of the book in relation to the female body in order to articulate the significance of the book as a metaphor for the female self. This provides the context for the last part of the chapter where I discuss the significance of books in relation to the development of my own sense of self which was the starting point for this project.

BOOK AS METAPHOR FOR THE BODY; PHYSICALITY OF THE BOOK

In their labeling, the book and the body share many parts; some examples of this being the body, spine, skin, head, back, head, face, foot and tail.¹

¹ Donaldson, G 1981, Books, Phaidon, Oxford p. 123. Some of these examples have been used in a book label by R.Tunstall. "Reader of your gentle grace, lay me not upon my face, open in your hand I'd lie; close me when you lay me by, nor let me in the book rests prone. Tortured, twisted make me moan, upon my feet to stand is best; If you'd

Both have been chained with heavy links of metal so that they would not escape (Figure 1).



They have been loved, lost, tortured, burned, turned to, stitched, worn out, discarded and treasured. Both have been dressed with cloth and leather; decorated with elaborate embellishments such as embroidery, gold work, headbands, piercing and edging.

spare the pains of age, turn not down the cornered page..." and when you hold a book "...Keep your hands behind its back."

Both the book and the body share the ability to contain, hold, reference and reveal an internal text. Both require interaction and closeness in order to gain intimacy and understanding

Both have external 'skins' that protect their internal structure. The body's stretch marks can be seen in the overstuffing of a book's spine as it cracks and splits. Kurt Akkerskev describes how a book changes even when it is "sitting on the shelf; A library full of books is a whirlpool of persistent change. We want text to solidify language, but language is too fluid. We are too fluid."² The book and body both show the signs of age, odour and discolouration with time, work and abuse. Like the body, the book continues to age even when resting.

Common sayings in contemporary language describe the physical act of taking the book into the body as food; "Devouring a book", "Regurgitating and spewing up a text", "Rolling of words on the tongue" and "Feasting on the words". On July 31, 593 BC, Ezekiel the priest is said to have had a vision in which he was ordered to open his mouth and consume the book that was written "within and without" his body.³

Medieval manuscripts often called for the body to lend ears to a text. Public readings were common as relatively few people could read. It was

² Webber Marshall, *Key Note Paper, Third Artist Book Conference in Mackay*. http://www.artspacemackay.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/25930/Marshall_Weber_Keynote_Lecture.pdf

³ Alberto Manguel, 1997, *A History of Reading*, p.171 Saint Johns' vision instructed him to take the open book that appeared from heaven, and without writing anything down, devour it. He was told that it would make his stomach bitter; however, thru giving voice to the words he had consumed they would become as sweet as honey.

Rothenberg, J & Guss, D (eds) 1996, *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, pp. 100-101. At festivals of high ritualistic importance the King would appear in a white cloth covered in Arabic letters and signs. Warriors in the 10th Century sometimes wore script that during battle. A potent liquid text known as *siliama-gue* or "Muslim soup" may be worn or consumed for protection. The soup was made from the washing water from Islamic slates or chalk boards and steeped with special roots and herbs.

not until the 10th Century that silent reading became common practice in Western Society. The mute books on the shelves were literally given a voice by their readers. There were no commas or full stops, just a string of continuous text. The flow and speed of the voice gave punctuation and flow to the text in the same way our voices give words sound. Manguel describes, for some, reading is still a very bodily experience.⁴ Here he recalls watching and hearing his Grandmother reading in an animated and vocal manner. He describes the black covers of the only book in her collection as aging and softening, to resemble her own skin. The simultaneous aging of the book and the body can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. They, like Manguel's Grandmother, have absorbed the text and the book has assimilated into their own skin's appearance.



Figure 2: Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch, *Self portrait*, c. 1780 (Borzello, F 2000, p.99).



Figure 3: Jacob Van Campen, *Old Woman with a Book*, oil on canvas, 70 x 56 cm (Franits,WE 1995, p.178).

⁴ Manguel, Op.cit, p.46. In Islam the rules demand that the text be read “loud enough for the reader to hear it himself,”

In the fifth century, Socrates is quoted as saying in Carruther's (1990, p.60) that "the written words; seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from which you want to know more, they go on telling you the same thing over and over again forever."⁵

In contrast, in 1250, Richard de Fournival, Chancellor of the Cathedral of Amiens (cited in Manguel, A 1997, p.45) suggested that memory and information gained from others is essential to fulfill our desire for knowledge. He argued that in another space and time the reader gives the text a new voice bringing it into the present. *"Faced with a written text, the reader has a duty to lend voice to the silent letters, the scripta, and allow them to become, in a delicate biblical distinction, Verba, spoken words-spirit."*

It is the mute book and not the reader for Fournival (cited in Manguel 1997, pp.59-60) that passed on memory of the other in preference to the oral tradition. The book unfolds, both to reveal and conceal a mute text.

Through both my research and practice I have investigated the relationship between the surface of the body and the inner text (non physical) of memory, thought and containment using the analogy of the book.

To paraphrase Alberto Manguel, (1997, p.169) human beings are books to be read. He says that 'The act of reading serves as a metaphor to help us understand our hesitant relationship with the body, the encounter and the touch and the deciphering signs in another person'. In his poem, *To a 13th Century Manuscript*, Austin Dobson (cited in Donaldson 1981, p.15) refers to the contents of old books as *"Beating – like a human soul...something mute but eloquent"*.

⁵ Carruthers Marg J, 1990, *The Book of Memory*, Cambridge, p. 60.

Examples of the use of this bodily metaphor exist on tombstones as early as the seventeenth century. At the end of their life the loved one's body/life is described as 'a closed book' (Manguel, A 1997, pp.1969-172).



Hossein Valamanesh (Figure 4) uses the physical shape of the human form to create the silhouetted shape for the blank pages of his book. Here the metaphor for the book as body is literally laid out before us. The title, *Open Book*, is a paradoxical one with its blank pages playing on

the saying to “read you like an open book”. The blood red vein-like satin ribbon lies silently dividing the figure/book in the centre of the spine. This blood wound of the mind falls symbolically down the internal breast plate fold of the book where words and thoughts usually busily divide.

The symbol of blood has had a long association with books. “*Of everything written,*” pronounced Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, “*I love only that which someone writes in his blood. Write in blood; and you will know that blood is spirit.*”(Bradburne, J 2002, p.21). Both the body and the book have the ability to bleed.⁶ By the tenth century the first lines of texts were often written in red ink, the colour of blood.

Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus, 1774 by Jan van Riemsdyck, surprises us with the insertion of the book, but notice that the folds of skin peeled back, suggest the pages of the book. Instructive medical illustrations display the internal anatomy of the body but may still obfuscate the external genitalia.



Figure 5: Jan van Riemsdyck *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774 (Petherbridge, D & Jordanova, D 1998).

⁶ Bleeding in ink can occur when a printed page is exposed to moisture and also in printing terms a print can be ‘bleed’ printed (meaning its image or text goes off the edges of the paper).

Here, as in Figure 4, the body peels back to literally read as an open book. In this work the flesh visually extends the page into the flesh of the body.

WOMEN AND THE BOOK

The analogy between the female body and the book was very powerfully captured when describing the tearing of the edges of new books by paper knives to expose their contents. The edges were sealed to guarantee that the owner of the book was the first to read it. Often the edges of the books were red, and this act of tearing has been likened to virginal bleeding (Rothenberg & Guss 1996, p.19⁷; Drucker, J 1995, p.36⁸). This bodily colour and feminine association has, unconsciously at first, become the predominant colour of my visual investigation.

In his chapter, *Reading Within Walls*, Alberto Manguel (1997, p.231) suggests that even if in many cultures the libraries were open to women they would not have found their voice inside the books.

In response to this situation in Japan a phonetic translation of the tongue called the *Kanabungaku*, or women's writing, was developed. Manguel (1997, p.232) describes these women authors as "*holding up mirrors of their own lives,*" through these texts. They were written primarily for the women's own pleasure.

⁷ "The unopened virginal book, moreover, ready for the sacrifice from which the red edges of ancient books bleed."

⁸ "the physical violation invited by the book, posed in terms of a gendered metaphor of phallic knife and virginal folds."

The subjects of my research are women reading and waiting to be read. In all the Victorian photographic portraits that I examined the women's inner voice and inner text is lost. Books have been placed in the portraits as metaphors/indicators of their virtues and character.

These books by their placement become prostheses, visually appearing to be an extension of the physical body: and at the same time hint at mental complexity and possible intrigue. Within the context of my research these books also function as symbols of their lost stories and unreadable texts.

With their gaze, the women appear to be challenging and requiring interaction from the viewer in order to give them a voice. It seems ironic that in posing for the portrait, the women are presenting themselves for posterity. However, in doing so, they have inadvertently become one dimensional, void of any personal text. Without labeling and naming they do not even have an identity. It is this mute gaze and loss of self that underpins my research into the book and the body.

Fowler (2006) analyses examples of portraits of women reading. She concentrates on the voyeuristic nature of a viewer entering into a private world and the moment captured by portrait painters where the women are escaping through the book to another world. At that moment in time Fowler states, it is often impossible or even unnecessary to know what the woman is reading, just that she has entered into another world or character, sometimes leaving clues to where she is by her expression or symbols in the image. At that moment, she is not herself but the other. She may, through the pleasure of reading, be a male in combat or in the heat of romance; an animal in an exotic land; a person of another time and place, experiencing pleasure or pain. Similarly, I escaped into books as a child.

It is through my own awareness of self and mortality that I look at Victorian photographs and Elizabethan portraits of women holding books. I see myself in their faces and wonder what their story is. In

Susan Stewart's book, *On Longing*, (1993, p.127) she describes the face as a "kind of deep text".

I look at the books that these women hold and that I cannot read. Standing stiffly and contained, they are as mute as the stories that are within the books that they hold. Their strong gazes reveal little, if anything, of themselves and the experience of living. This blankness, or loss of story, enables me to project some of my own experience into these pictures. As I search to identify the stories that are hidden behind the covers of their bodies, they in turn become blank self-referential slates for my own story.

During this research I have surrounded myself with the images I have described and show here. The first and probably most central of these to my project is *Elizabeth I when Princess* (1533-1603) by an unknown artist, c. 1546. (Figure 6) However in describing this image, I could easily describe any one of the other Elizabethan images that I have sourced for this research.



Figure 6: Attrib. William Scrots, c1546 *Elizabeth I when Princess*, (Cody, M 2008).

Amongst overwhelmingly rich warmth of colour Elizabeth stands in a heavily ornamented dress, centred in a three-quarter length portrait. She is twelve or thirteen years; a self-conscious age that reflects both the child and the woman, cautious, mysterious and at the same time composed. She presents herself both like the book on the stand near her right shoulder that reveals a selected page gently resting open. The closed book that she is holding hides and protects its inner contents. It is an image filled with contrasts, questions and invitations.

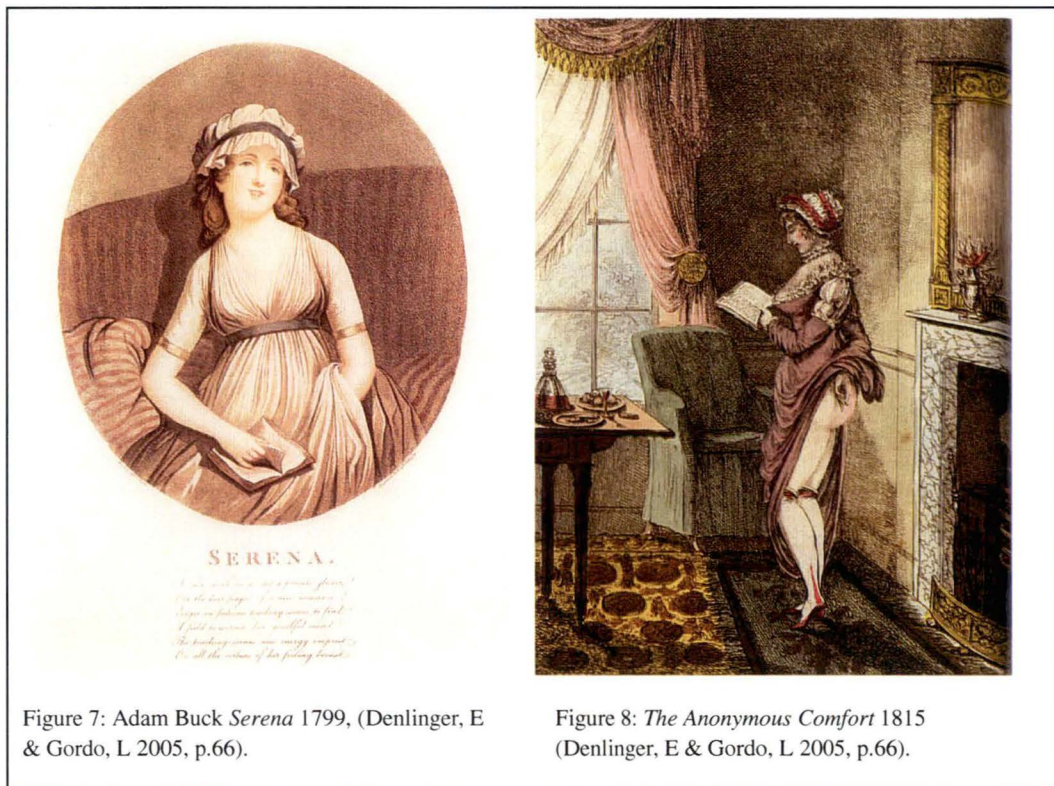
Elizabeth is happy for people to know that she is a well-read autonomous individual. She presents herself as someone of high mental and moral standards while retreating from personal expression of thoughts and feelings.

Like the ornamented book, Elizabeth holds herself shut. With pursed lips, the only path to her inner self is through her eyes. They are dark, mysterious, self-conscious and wary. Her gaze is locked on the viewer's allowing the viewer to know there is more, but beyond outward appearance the invitation to know more is absent.

The long elegant fingers of her right hand lead you to the closed book's ornamented cover; thumb poised ready to open it for herself. At the same time, one ringed finger of her left hand holds her place and leads your eye inside to a place that is closed excluding the viewer. Her fingers hold the book clamped back and front. Its contents, like her thoughts, remain a mystery.

BOOKS OF SOCIAL ETIQUETTE; WHO I WAS TOLD I SHOULD BE

The activity of reading by women has been strongly associated with the instruction of moral virtue in western culture. Medieval moralists appear to have been very torn when it came to whether the general population of woman should be allowed to learn to read and have access to books. One school of thought said that girls should only learn to read if they were to become nuns. If they learn to read for any other intention they may write and receive “amorous missives.” The other debated that girls should learn to read in order to protect themselves from “the perils that menace their souls” (Figures 7 & 8).



Humanist Edward Hake (cited in Bollman 2006, p.15) wrote that woman would “Smell of naughtiness even all her life after once she got the taste for frivolous books.”

In the Forward to *Reading Women* (Bollman 2006, p. 15) Karen Fowler quotes the Spanish humanist, Jaun Luis Vives as having written in 1523 that, “women ought not to follow her own judgment” as she is not capable of making wise choices. This view is illustrated in, Figure 9. *Tales of Wonder* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, and other symbolically loaded images of the time. Vives stated that women should only read what men with “their superior judgment” deemed proper and wholesome. Books that were deemed appropriate for women to read included manuals of etiquette, most of which were published from the 18th Century onwards.



Figure 9: Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Tales of Wonder* 1802 (Denlinger, E & Gordo, L 2005, p.106).

As antiquated as these texts on etiquette may appear, they give a frame to my research and the visual representation of my own instructed silent

absorption of similar texts. Despite changes that occurred in the larger social, political, and religious structure, the use of rules of daily living as a means of controlling women were still circulating in contemporary etiquette publications owned by my mother's family. They include, *Frankly Feminine*, *Three Hundred and one things a Bright Girl Can Do*, and a magazine called *Home Circle*, which included articles like "Accomplishments for Young Women".

Henrietta Moore argued in 1988 (p.) that femininity can be viewed as either 'symbolic construction' or as 'social relationship'. Regardless of feminist scholars demonstrating that the assumptions of binary coding systems are flawed; the belief in binary gender divisions continues to be an extremely powerful coding system underpinning our western society.

Just as I was encouraged to adopt *Frankly Feminine*, young women throughout history have been encouraged to live by the morals and standards of similar books. In *Mirror of Ancient times* - a popular 17th Century Emblem book by Jacob Cats (1632), women's bodies and souls were to become in a sense the book.(Figure 10)



Figure 10: Jacob Cats, *Frontispiece Spiegel vanden ouden en nieuwen tijdt*, The Hague 1632 (Franits W 1993, p.128).

In the front of the book Cats explains that ‘the mirror’ (held by Truth, Figure 10) is ‘his book’ and advises his reader to “*look into it as you would a mirror*” (Franits 1993, p.127). An example of one of Cats’ emblem books in use is seen in the portrait titled *Portrait of a Family* (Figure 11) by an unknown artist.



Figure 11: School of Thomas de Keyser, *Portrait of a Family*, oil on canvas 85.5 x 107.5 cm, (Franits, W 1993, p.7).

Here we see a young woman (presumably the mother) seated casually in both the centre of the image and the centre of the family. She appears to have been interrupted from her reading by a gentleman (presumably the father). The woman’s gaze does not lead us to her open book, but to the man who stands looking down upon her. He has one hand upon his hip clutching a pair of gloves, (indicating that he has just returned from

outside) and the other clutching the back of her chair. His questioning expression looks as if he is requiring some sort of explanation. Her left hand responds indicating that she has everything under control as she gestures to a baby seated in a high chair being happily entertained by a young sibling.

The eldest child stands to her father's left. Dressed in the same fashion, she is a mirror of her mother. Her gaze is looking out at the viewer, perhaps seeking defence of her mother's seemingly idle actions. Her right hand rests down, holding a fan (another symbol used in paintings of the period to symbolize good feminine attributes). Her left hand mimics her mother's gesture, this time gesturing towards her mother's open book. It is a copy of Cats' *Houwelyck*, first published in 1625. The book is held open so that the viewer can not only see it but also recognise it. It is open on page seventy-two of the chapter entitled "vrouwe" (housewife) (Franits, pp.5-6).⁹

This demonstrates the primary function of education for women, in this context, of the social and etiquette books, is to strengthen their chastity and enhance their domestic skills and to understand their place within a familial structure.

While these popular philosophies of the time are outdated in our modern world, they are relevant to my own upbringing and to the relationship that women have to the book in my current research.

THE BOOK AS MANUAL TO THE SELF

The impetus for this research came from my own interest in books and the stories that they hold. I was given books before I was born.

⁹ Gives a full description of the chapters of Jacob Cats' book.

Throughout my childhood, I would spend three months of every year isolated physically and emotionally from my home and my mother. I was labelled unaccompanied child. Suburban NSW became my intense training ground. It is here that I learnt that I had many selves. There were the ones that were on the external and the ones that were concealed on the inside for no one else to know. Each person that read me saw a different self. Here I was loved with a hard love that was meant to teach me to be someone else, someone stronger. It is here I learnt to accept that it was because of my face that bad things happened.

“Right now you look just like your father, I can’t stand that face go to your room” my Grandmother would announce at dinner. My face was so horrible that I could not even bring it to the dinner table. I thought that must be why my father left. At the age of five the responsibility of my father’s abandonment was placed onto my shoulders. This realisation of the power of my face provided me with a plausible answer to the chaotic and changing adult world I was being drawn into.

Donna Williams, Australian author of *Nobody Nowhere* and *Somebody Somewhere*, (1994, pp. 229-230) wrote of her experience of feeling disconnected with her body. Williams describes in her twenties the feeling of her hand touching her leg for the first time with a conscious awareness of both internally.

This discovery continued to her face. “My hands went up to my face. My face was there from the inside. My body was more than just a series of textures that my hands knew, an image my eyes saw...” (Cole, J 1999, p.90). Williams was eventually diagnosed with Autism.

For Williams, during her childhood, the reflection that she describes seeing in the mirror was not her own. She saw someone else. She would stare at the person in the mirror and that person would stare back at her.

It was not until her adult life that she was able to experience the feeling of residing in her own body. "At home I would spend hours in front of the mirror, staring into my own eyes and whispering my name...frightened at losing my ability to feel myself"(Cole, J 1999 p.90).

At the age of five I isolated myself from interaction with friends and went into a silent world. "It is because of my face I would explain to my mother". My perception of myself had changed.

With the newly developed skill of reading, books became my retreat. No matter how strange or unintelligible my world became, I could always safely escape to find my sense of self. It is ironic that at the same time as I lost confidence in myself, I found myself in books. I found an inner voice.

Silent reading became a fanciful way to have a dialogue by myself, with myself. I did not read in a linear way prescribed by the structure of the book. I had not acquired sufficient skills. I delved in and out of text as conversation. This enabled me to find myself in the text of another.

Psychologist James Hillman (1926 -) describes in Manguel (1997, pp.35-38) stories as "something lived in and through, a way in which the soul finds itself in life." Hillman states that through introducing children to reading we enable them to acquire a history of life to use as a tool.

At the age of nine, the denigration of my looks continued; "It is because of your smile, because you are too friendly, that tells men that you think it is ok...don't tell your mother, just forget it, don't talk about it or they will take you away. Now off you go and play". I never mentioned it again, it continued to happen, but now I knew why; because of my face.

I was taught to be seen and not heard, to hide and stay silent, to listen and learn. I was loved, burdened, abused and sheltered.

I was condemned through experience to take on the weight of adult issues onto my childish frame both physically and emotionally. It is here that I

escaped into the bookshelf to find my 'self', an inner self that nobody else could find.

THE STORY BOOK: WHO I BELIEVED I WAS

The story books that I read during this time were my escape back to childhood. They were the same story books that were held and read in the hands of my mother. Her name was still inscribed in the endpapers as physical evidence she was there. Her childish eyes had scanned the texts that my eyes now scanned; she consumed the words that I consumed. It was with this knowledge of my mother's path that drove my passion to read, scan and reread the text searching for my mother and to find my 'self'. However it is not the original text that drove my passion for reading; it was the constructed texts that I found that were important to me. It was a game. I could hear my mother's voice in fragments of text I would rearrange and string back together to form new stories. It was, I believed, our secret code to talk to each other. I found her hidden in the books that she had read and the words gave me the tools (I felt even then) to find myself.

Although I was taught to treasure books, it was at the age of two or three that I first took scissors to a book to make an altered piece. This was an important moment in the history of the book in my world. That book remains in my collection as both physical evidence of my actions and an oral account of my character passed down to me through my mother. The book is titled Good little bad little girl. I am said to have taken the story of this book and the moral lessons it was teaching me very much to heart. I did not like cruelty or conflict. I strived to be the good little girl and felt within my own body the poisonous weight of the bad little girl in my book. It is with that strong desire to eliminate the bad that I took scissors to my book. I intended to cut all of the bad girls out, in the process

unintentionally destroying the good girls over the page. However, it is with the same process that I now manipulate, cut, stitch and glue fragments of texts that I have inherited to combine into a new context of self.

I have always felt a strong affiliation and empathy with the characters in books. My father's name is Christopher Robin after the story book character. He would disappear for large chunks of my childhood, leaving me with no contact except through a namesake in a book. I searched to both reveal and conceal my inner self in the fairy tales that I read. I would pick out the characters that best reminded me of myself. I am even said to have renamed myself adding my given names, the character name, paternal and maternal family names together for long periods of time. At a very early age I announced I was to be called Leonie Jane Cinderella Oakes Leake, and refused to be named by anything else.

Cinderella is a kind but persecuted heroine, who suffers at the hands of her step-mother and step sisters. Her father is, depending on the version, either absent or powerless to assist due to his own grief and unhappiness. My father was absent initially due to naval duty, then alcoholism, followed by divorce, complete abandonment and virtual death.¹⁰ The guardian is sometimes a representative of our heroine's dead mother, a magic tree that is planted on her grave. As mentioned in the introduction, I was separated from my mother for long periods of time. Sometimes the guardian takes on the form of a Fairy God Mother. I had my own very active God Mother. In the true Disney fairy tale sense, my God Mother

¹⁰ Note finding myself labelled "bastard child" by a neighbourhood mother for belonging to the only divorced family in the street, I found it less complicated to justify my fathers disappearance from the face of the earth by giving him a virtual death. It is very hard for a child who feels their face is responsible for his departure to explain his choice to leave to her friends. It only became complicated when my fairytale exit of the villain/hero was overshadowed by his own reincarnation for long enough to complicate my story (one phone call, and a couple of visits until his return for another short visit in my adult life).

was a voluptuous woman, the bearer of treats and affection. This woman takes on a protective role in the absence of her maternal mother. There is no fairy god mother in the earliest recorded version of the tale which came from China in the early 19th Century. The original guardian takes on the form of a guardian fish helper.

Most of the tales include an epiphany sparked by a beautiful shoe. I am said to have had an affiliation with shoes, detesting the feeling of bare feet on any surface. My second word was shoe. It is only when the lost shoe is found by the Prince and subsequently trialed on every girl in the neighborhood that the heroine is claimed (rescued). Cinderella is not recognised by the prince for her internal or external beauty, it is only when she is reunited with her fashion accessory that she is recognised as the beautiful princess she is to become. In the process of the fairy tale, she too, seems to have been rendered faceless.

While I am no Cinderella, she was the ideal character to aspire to. She had the feminine ideals that I was being taught, she was kind, loved and while treated badly she represented a “happily ever after”. This affiliation with a character and projection of self on that character is relevant to my masters research.

It is through the other that I see myself. It is through the expressions on the faces of others I judge myself. I am the only person that never sees a true unreflected image of my face. I see my reflection in the eyes of others. It is through these expressions on the faces of others, I judge myself. Through the other I see who I ‘should be’, and I explore who I have become.

THE FAMILY ALBUM: WHO I COULD SEE I WAS

The viewing of the family album was as ritualistic and regular as my Grandmother’s visits to church. While she was away, my Grandfather would unlock the hidden treasure and we would delve into the faces that

had been hidden. We had two sets of family album, the acceptable and unacceptable. The public album consisted of the currently acceptable family members. The secret or unacceptable held the family ghosts, the dead or shunned. They were hoarded away contained in a metal box inside a larger metal chest, hidden inside a cupboard further concealing them. Like a forbidden treasure chest, this chest was locked with a small brass combination lock. It is here that I found my first image of a woman holding a book. Her image was inscribed only with the family name. Her face was familiar but she had no other clues to who she was, or what she was reading.

The acceptable family album took pride of place in the bookshelf. It was commonly viewed and talked about. It got altered regularly with updated images or the occasional silent removal of an image of someone no longer in the family. It is through this constant viewing that I learnt that;

*I have my mother's eyes
my grandmother's hair
and my father's colouring
although I am almost the spitting
image of my aunt
at the same ages*

The tradition of the family album creates a pictorial fairytale. The photograph in the family album brings with it nothing more than a constructed projection and manipulated history. Behind happy faces there hides a narrative of a more balanced existence, filled with not only with happy times but also with tension and chaos. Through repeated readings, and the oral tradition of reflection, faces became not personalities.

As well as books of etiquette and fairy tales, the family album played an important part in shaping my life. The books that I have used in my work are encyclopedias, books of etiquette and cooking, anatomy and social behavior, storybooks and the family album- all the books that were accessible to me. They have all played an important role in shaping my life, and similar books could be found on the shelves of most western homes in my lifetime. I have read, learnt, studied and added to these since my childhood.

Within this context, my masters' project aims to visually explore the inherited feminine text of my family, layered with my own experience of the female self in childhood and its impact onto the adult self within a contemporary framework.

The focus in my work is on making work that both reveals and conceals an inner self to the viewer. I also draw the analogy of the book to the female self within the context of my own awareness of body and self. In doing this I aim to create a body of work that can be read as pages of the one story. The individual pieces of work, when viewed as a whole, both reveal and conceal a larger story of a text that is deeply hidden to the viewer, and like the images of my research, has the potential to be lost.

My intention in this chapter has been to establish the cultural history of the metaphysical connections between the book to body and particularly the female body and give a framework to my research. In the following

chapter, I will link this to its contemporary counterpart, the Artists' Book and provide a contemporary context to my research.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXT

In contextualising the work, I examined the work of artists who depict the book as prop, object or subject; artists who have used narrative as an expression of self and those who have used the medium of the book to produce their work. I have used predominantly, but not exclusively, print based artists to frame my research. I considered ways in which the artists had used the idea of the book conceptually as a vessel to engage and manipulate the viewers' experience.

The key artists that I will be discussing are Nancy Spero, Sally Smart, Carson Fox, Johanna Drucker, Paula Rego, Audrey Niffenegger, and Artist Ariana Page Russel. While they do not all refer to themselves as Book Artists, or even to their work as books, they all imply 'bookness' and function in some way towards a reading of the body as book. Common to all to these artists is how they challenge our notion of the book and its relevance to the female experience.

Artists, Paula Rego, Nancy Spero, Miriam Schaer and Audrey Niffeneggers all make direct reference to their own personal stories using the idea of the book. Artist, Ariana Page Russel uses her body as a blank slate to inscribe a text while Carson Fox uses hair to form a text of the body. It is the primal act of inscribing and the embodiment of thought that sites her in the realm of the book for my research.

THE ARTISTS' BOOK AND ITS REDEFINING OF THE BOOK;

In recent times with the advent of the Artist's book, the book has moved beyond its cultural function of simply being a carrier of information.

The Artist's Book can control, both spatially and physically, how the viewer is able to handle and read the book. The book is traditionally embodied in the form of a portable object that can be held in the hand. Changes in its scale, larger or smaller, alter the relationship that the viewer has to the book. In most cases with artist's books the Artist is the author, illustrator, designer and binder. As a result, the inner and outer space interpenetrate each other and the act of looking and reading leads the viewer through a labyrinthine web.

The Artist's book is continuing to alter the way we interpret books. The question of "what is a book?" is one that is still being debated and seems to provide more questions than answers.

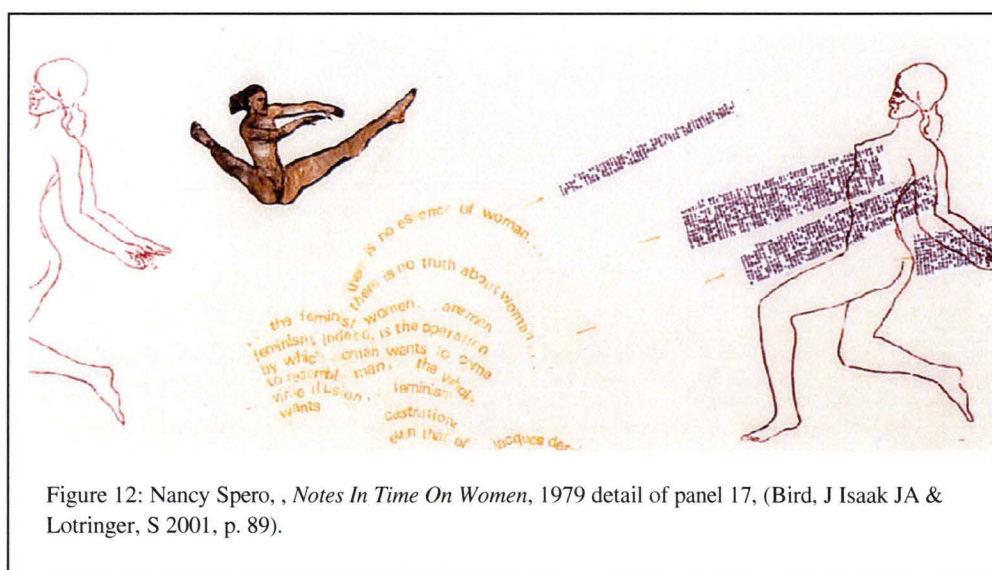
At the beginning of my research into books as both object and subject I felt it was necessary to pin down a definition and join the debate. I found myself asking the question; "What is a book and how can a book be experienced?"

In his book, *Structure of the Visual Book*, Keith Smith (1984, p.56) points out that definitions are not 'fixed ageless laws' but rather that they are simply 'current understanding'. Smith says that in conceiving a book, it is worth repeating, "a book is more than the sum of its parts." The artists' book continues to push the boundaries of the book and I surmise that it always will. My project seeks to emphasise this dissolve between the book and body both in their structure and function.

Although I define a book relatively simply, its primary function being recording, carrying and storing information and transmitting this knowledge to the body, this in fact enables inclusion of works that push the parameters of what can be considered book. It can include both the body as book and book as body.

ARTISTS THAT DEPICT OR PRODUCE BOOKS

It is the embodiment of woman through linguistic and inverted narrative that draws me to Spero's work. The linear presentation, direct illustrative or textural reference and dialogue with a reader sites her in the realm of the artists' book. Nancy Spero differentiates between her desire "To see what it means to view the world through the depiction of women" rather than to simply "view the world through the depiction of women." (Bird, Isaak & Lotringer, 2001, p. 89) Myth is a word that is often associated with Spero's work.¹¹ In the context of contemporary myth, as opposed to the ancient myth containing supernatural beings, Spero's work is relevant to my research.



In Figure12, Spero combines words of war, childbirth and independence which dwarf the naked female forms that appear to be going into battle and fighting back, textually and pictorially (Bird, J (ed) 2003, p.125, pp.128-129). The structure of the work is one of the simplest and oldest styles of books, the scroll. The texts are the voices of men victimising

¹¹ Myth is derived from the Greek word mythos, which means "word of mouth".

women, cultural conditioning, self loathing women and liberated women answering back, textually and pictorially. This work speaks of and for all women. Each person has a story that is inherently their own. When making this early work Spero was fighting on behalf of all women.

Speros' figures are outlined and scared with red, ritualistic and violent. Her women shout back the cultural history of oppression towards women with the same violence that they are fighting against. This textual wounding can also be seen in the narrative portraits accompanied by depictions of the Mayan civilization. Like Spero, they depict scenes of ritualistic bloodletting and self-sacrifice, involuntary bloodshed and torture of prisoners. According to Mayan belief the hallucinatory states achieved through bloodletting allowed the gods communication with mortal world. One of the most sacred of sources of blood for women was the tongue. In the depictions of Maya bloodletting, thick thread of about the width of a finger was drawn through a wound in the tongue. This allowed the blood to flow from the body onto a piece of paper-like material below.

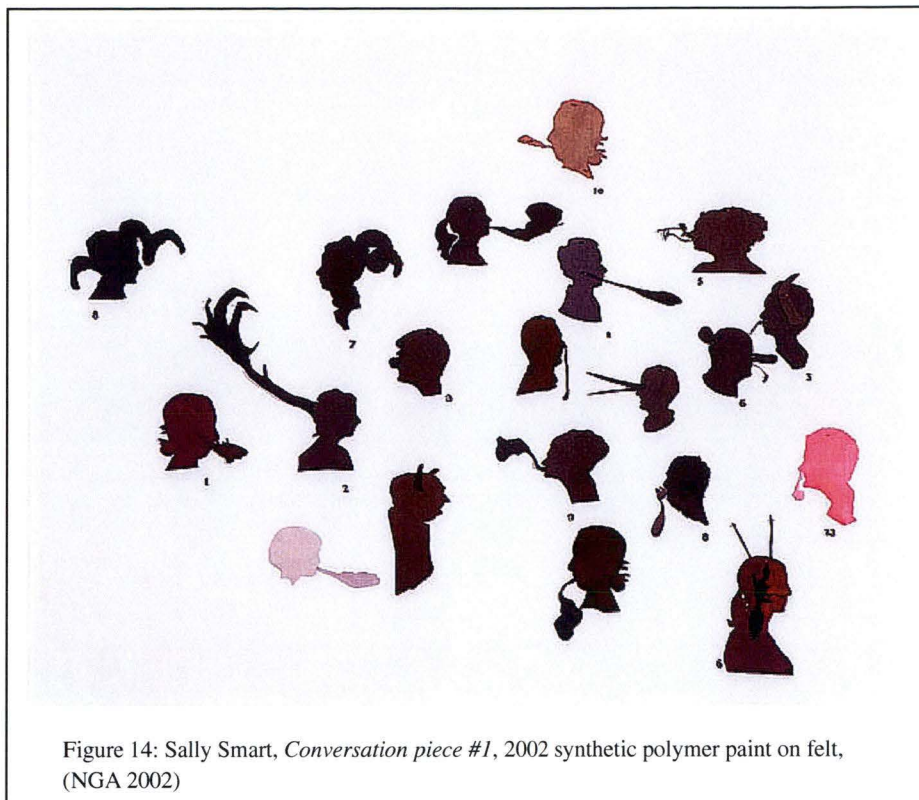


Figure 13 *The Queen, Lady Xoc (seated), draws a rope through her pierced tongue, (Took place on 28th October, 709), 109.7 x 77.3 cm, Yaxchilan, drawn by Charnay (<http://en.allexperts.com/e/y/ya/yaxchi8i>).*

It is the use of blood as a symbol for text that is a central theme for my own practice. For Spero and the Maya people, language spills from the body and blood acts as its writing implement to transcend into another form of interpreting the internal voice.

Another artist working with spillage of language from the body is Sally Smart. Like Spero, her work implies 'bookness'. Her books are not bound in the traditional sense. She does not refer to the work by calling it a book. However, they can be read like a book and they are sourced and styled from book illustrations. Smart's work begins as a bodily action of construction and deconstruction, telling and un-telling, then re-telling again. The body is internally and externally skewed. In my work I have also explored how this bodily action of making and reconstructing can be pieced together to represent both the internal/external, past/present, to form a more layered and complex reading.

The title of the work *Conversation piece #1*, (Figure 13), makes direct reference to the construction of self and identity through the oral tradition of storytelling and the desire to be heard. Each time they are displayed the separate collage elements allow a different conversation to happen. It is not just the symbol of blood as text, or historical reference books of knowledge and the bodily action of spillage represented as text that draws me to this piece, but also the process of collage and making and retelling. The order that the work is placed, the order the viewer scans the images and the personal history that the reader brings to the work all layer to create a breathing living text.



The decapitated side profile silhouettes are spewing forth their conversations, not in a textual sense, but as a physical spillage of object or internal body part. They reference books, but are not presented in a book format. Images function as a projection of language, text is implied through these cartoon-style text balloon projectiles. They are strange, grotesque beautiful and disturbing.

In *Blood; Art, Power and Politics*, Mino Gabriele (2002, p.33) says, “On the one hand, blood is a warm liquid that moves and nourishes the body from within, filling it with life. On the other hand, however, if the blood flows out of the body, this heralds death. The spilling of blood evokes rituals and arcane liturgies, and invokes and nourishes the gods.... In the one instance blood can be seen as a flowing red sap, in the other as a liquid that quickly turns dark, thickens, and curdles.” The blood texts of Smart’s projectiles are the colour of dead blood.

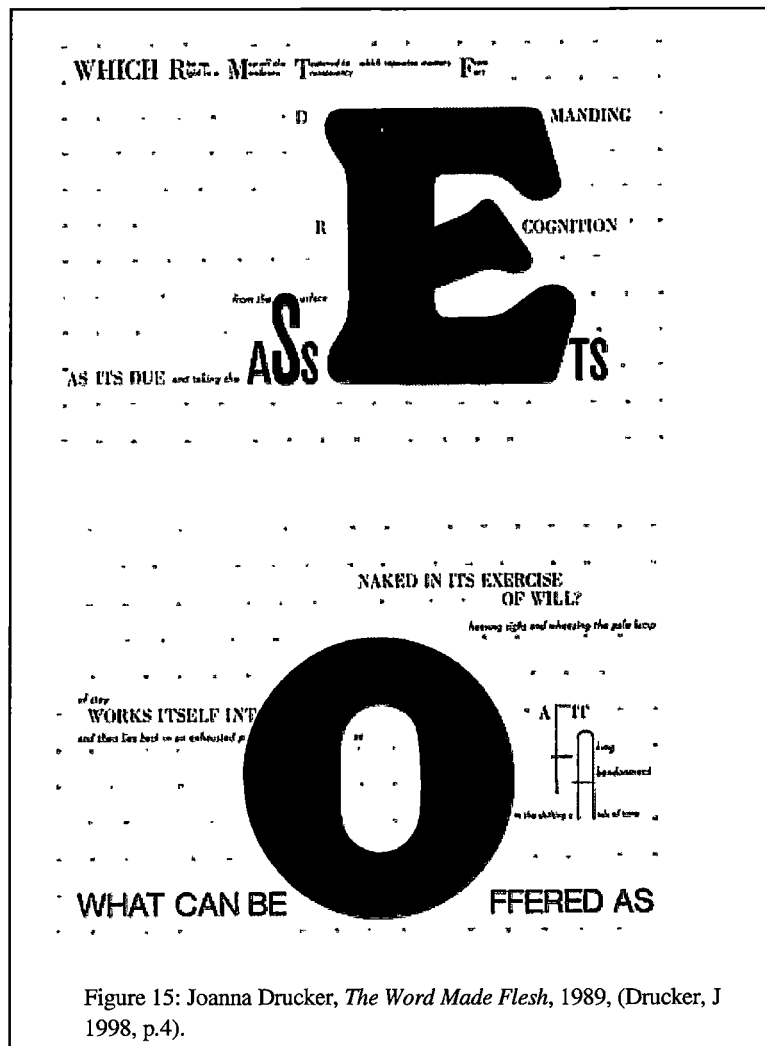
While not self portraits, a recurring theme in Smart’s work is the investigation into the portrayal of women in 18th and 19th-century

literature and its impact of feminine identity. These cut outs with their numbering reference the same encyclopaedias, anatomy texts and Women's journals of the 18th and 19th Centuries that I use in my work. This image for me combines the textual and bodily references of spillage, disease in combination with the reference to the Victorian portrait, but realises them in a different form. In chapter three, I will outline how I have used these books from my bookshelves in my work and their significance to the project.

Johanna Drucker's (1998, p.4) work is self-reflective with reoccurring themes of internal memory, personal history surrounded by cultural memory. Drucker explores the written word as a visual medium, foregrounding the materiality of the text. These explorations are bound by Drucker using traditional bookbinding techniques. Her use of the process of letterpress printing parallels some of the newly acquired skills that I have gained to realise my work.

In conceiving Figure 14, *The Word Made Flesh*, Drucker was faced for the first time with seductive cases of large wooden type. Materiality of the type was foregrounded. She engages with the traditional text based medium of letterpress, with its self conscious and time consuming act of typesetting, hand inking and the bodily action of printing. Drucker writes;

The physicality of printing makes that transformation a somatic experience, an act of the body, which moves the interior voice, the personal word, into the cultural domain (p.4).



While these letters are the starting point in the process of making, it is only with each subsequent turn of the page that the title *The Word Made Flesh* is revealed to the reader. The other linguistic units that surround the letters become denser and more complex as each page turns. Tiny red letters that fill the background interrupt personal memory with imagined history. Through this tiny metal handset type, Drucker recounts her memory of being taught to read by her mother in what she describes as ‘an intimate, even erotic relationship’. The work embodies the physical act of language, with it; breath, tongue and wistful flesh.

There are several textual games at play. It has been useful to my own practice to dissect this work and its clever use of language. For example

the word 'Itself' can be read as 'I' then 'self' if you discount the oversized 'T'. The tiny 'memory' drops its 'Y' down like a tear to 'no cr(y) is heard.' The 'S' that originates in the title of the book stands heavily in the centre of the page. It becomes the 'S' in 'The throbbing impul(s)e(s)' and is so large that, just like the emotion, it takes over. The same 'S' continues to predominate becoming the 'S' of the dwarfed (s)elf and (s)truggle.

Marjorie Perloff (cited in Clay, S 2001, p66.) of the Harvard Library Bulletin writes; "(Johanna) Drucker's autobiography (*The Word Made Flesh*) becomes a kind of hypertext, a set of possible verbal-visible paths that suggest further possibilities in the writing of her story." As with many of Drucker's works, the placement of the letters, and the text itself, encourage the reader to find not only her history, but our communal history, along with the reader's own personal history throughout the text.

In her book, *Figuring the Word; Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*, Drucker (1998, p.14) states that she first turned to writing, thinking that it would "save me from being a woman". Writing allowed her to feel empowered. She describes how she believed that feminism was a "compensatory discourse designed to help the inadequate to deal with their limitations." After her initial eschewal of feminism as a chronic disease or a noose, it is quite ironic that she found herself participating in a dialogue through her practice with the very thing that she was earlier rejecting. I have used my experience with a chronic disease as a way of telling a story of my resistance to embodying feminine ideals. Her work is often a self portrait and a universal dialogue with women and about women. She sources text and image from history and creates her own history of the world. I have used fragments of found text to piece together a personal text.

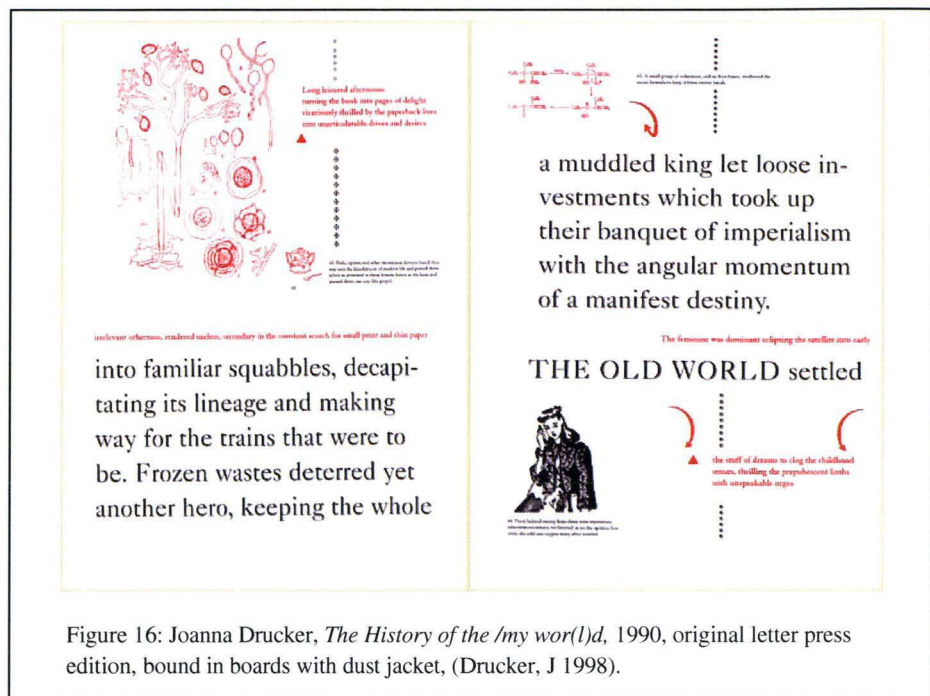


Figure 16: Joanna Drucker, *The History of the /my wor(l)d*, 1990, original letter press edition, bound in boards with dust jacket, (Drucker, J 1998).

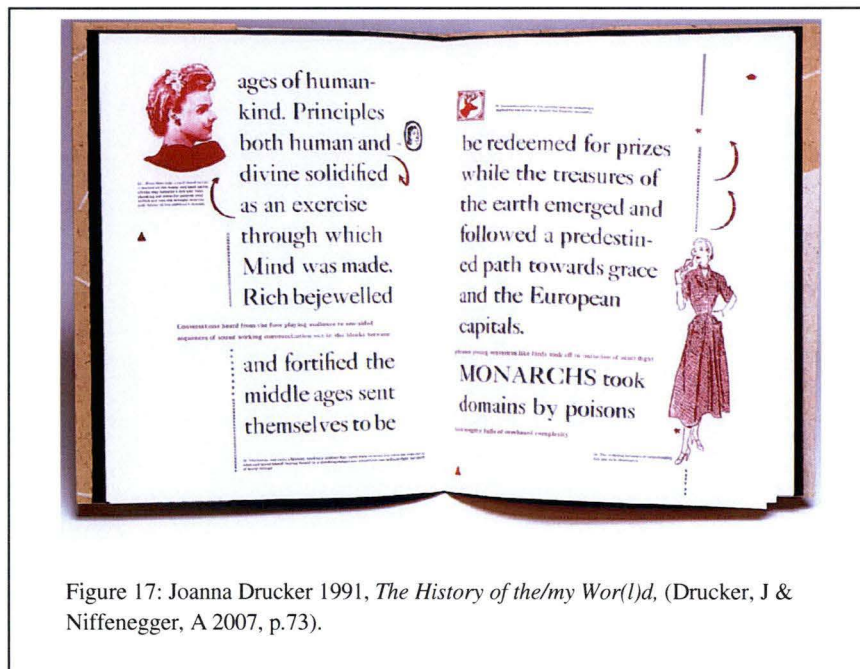


Figure 17: Joanna Drucker 1991, *The History of the /my Wor(l)d*, (Drucker, J & Niffenegger, A 2007, p.73).

In her work - *The History of the /my wor(l)d*, (Figures 15 & 16) Drucker is referencing the dichotomy between public and private, self and other, biography and autobiography, power and submission, feminine and masculine. Scale, placement, colour and proximity of image and text on the page are used as visual devices to force the reader to participate in a

non linear fashion. As with many of Drucker's artist books, the reader is encouraged to participate in a contemporary linguistic experience. This matrix provides the potential for new interpretations. One that is not bound by one story or meaning but can be fragmented and rebuilt through interaction. While Smarts unbound collages can be seen as a living moving body/book, so too can Druckers' textual pages. The letter press printed letters have a solidity and visual strength that does not impede the viewers ability to give them movement and life.

In contrast, photographer, Adriana Page Russell (2005) delicately inscribed hand formed letters turning her body into a living book. Her work, *Index* (Figure 17) is not relying on a viewer to give movement and life to the text, although transient the text is not open to multiple readings, it is the one text, with one reading that oozes from her body. It is the disease of her body that allows the text to transcend.

Dermatographia, which literally means "writing on the skin," is a disorder that produces hive like welts on the skin when it is scratched. She is a blank slate and the text appears like thoughts to rise out from within to the cover of her skin. In correspondence with Russell she mentioned that the actual text is unimportant, describing it as rambling thoughts.



Figure 18: Adriana Page Russell, *Index*, 2005 C-Print 17" x 23" (Russell, A 2008).

In contrast, for Carson Fox, the words are significant in her work. The words of the title reinforce the repetition of the text that forms the work; *I know about your broken heart*, (Figure 18) from the series, *Hair Filigree memorials*. This work expresses a dialogue and story of loss and grief, “memorializes beauty and its passing, investing the work with a profoundly ghostly air” (McFadden, DR, Scanlan, J & Edwards, J 2007, p.120).

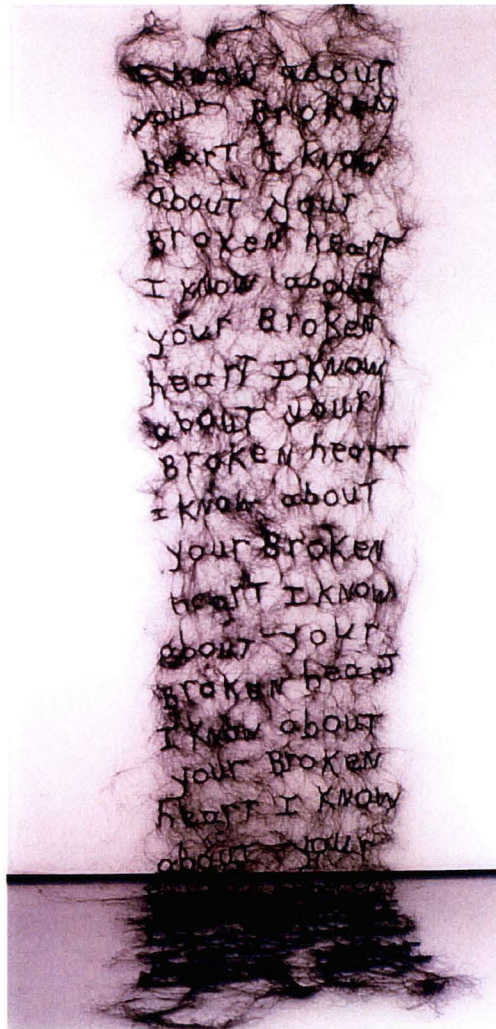


Figure 19: Carson Fox, *I know about your broken heart*, 2004, wire, synthetic hair 2.7 m x 64.8 cm, (McFadden, DR, Scanlan, J & Edwards, J 2007, p.120).

The work functions like a scroll as it cascades down the gallery wall and onto the floor. The words of its title, *I know about your broken heart*, are delicately woven over and over like a whisper from Fox to the woman she is immortalising. Hair is woven and knotted together to form a bodily text of the absent body. The body is present and absent at the same time. While the text is repetitive, saying the same thing over and over, it prompts the viewer to a deeper hidden story.

The work of Ariana Page Russell and Carson Fox are not referred to as books. They are not bound in the traditional sense. They do however contain some of the significant characteristics of a book in textual readability, containment of a story and visual reference to the body as container of an internal and bodily text. For the purpose of my research, their 'bookness' and reference to readability of the body as container for the absent body places them within the realm of artist books.

Paula Rego is another contemporary artist working in a very different way to articulate the silent and repressed bodily experience of the female self. While not bound in a book format, Paula Rego's work often uses the oral and literary fairy tales of her childhood to portray images of female self and feminine power.

She, too, is combining her own experience together with a greater public experience of being a woman. She is a storyteller, painter and printmaker. She is not a Book Artist, or binder and I have seen very few books used as props in the hands of her models. She does however use themes of fairy tale and role play of characters as a surrogate for self. She transforms the characters in the fairytales into women that have the voice that she inwardly desired. Through her contemporary incarnation they become very powerful women.

I have never been particularly drawn to Rego's work, I had always dismissed it. I find paintings bold and uncomfortable, her woman quite grotesque. However of particular relevance to my research, and my own childhood, is the striking resemblance that her upbringing has to my story.

As a child, she too, was taught the importance of obedience, good manners, proper etiquette, grooming and the feminine ideals to be adhered to. Books played an important role in her life though for Rego, it was the oral family tradition of storytelling that came before books

which is central to her work. In the historical context of storytelling, the voice and the body were the living book.

While I remember the mix of excitement and fear as my grandfather recited the nursery rhyme from one of my books, “fe fi fo fum”, Rego recounts the “shivers down her spine” (McEwen, J 2003, pg 19) as her father sat with her and turned the pages of a fine edition of Dante’s *Inferno*. When the excitement and the physicality of the character of the re-enactment were overwhelming Rego would run away just as I did after my grandfather’s recitation of “fe fi fo fum”. The fairy tale and its stories of conflict, fear, morality and delight became lived and real. This book remains in her collection.

Rego uses the traditional oral and literary fairytale as a reoccurring theme in her work. Through the depiction of the fairytale Rego is able to layer her own self portrait over the top of a pre existing tale in a similar way that we inherit a text from the generations before us. She uses the characters and liberates them, and in doing that, she creates a sense of self liberation.

The series, *Dog Woman*, (2003), developed to express the relationship of dog and its master, (Figure 19) “with increasing pitilessness, into those of her (Rego’s) own past” (McEwen, J 2003, pg 15). Rego, who often uses Lila Nules as her surrogate for herself in her work says;

To remind myself of the spirit of the original sketch I recreated Lila’s pose in front of the mirror, squatting down and snarling, one foreshortened knee swelling out. I think that physicality of the picture came from my turning myself into an animal in this way; but I had to have a face, so I asked Lila (Nules) to be the model.” (McEwen, J 2003, p. 212).



Figure 20: Paula Rego, *Grooming*, 1994, Pastel on canvas, 76 x 100cm, (McEwen, J 2003).

In Rego's depiction of *Snow White Swallows the Poisoned Apple*, Snow White is the embodiment of human misery, naivety of the young, bitterness of lost youth, internal and external conflict, envy, suffering, cruelty, and life's potential ability for a happily ever after. Rego's Snow White denies us that hope.

Here that the feminine ideals of the character and the Disney depiction are questioned. Our heroine is not a delicate and beautiful teenage girl, with "skin as white as snow". In contrast, she is a middle aged woman, of strong stature and olive skin. She is not laid serenely at rest waiting for her Prince to gently awaken her from her sleep. Our Heroine has fallen from her middle class sofa, bedding upturned in an almost suicidal fall from grace. We can imagine that only moments earlier she may have

been comfortably curled up in her satin costume under the familiar doona, watching television. Her face is contorted in pain. Her open hand melodramatically lays on her neck in the proximity of the piece of apple choking her airway. Even in this pain she appears to be conscious of her childish costume as her left hand clutches her satin dress. Its beautiful folds are modestly being pushed up over her thighs, by her clutched fist. Snow White is a woman, tragically alone, her costume alluding to lost youth. There is no utopia here.



Figure 21: Paula Rego, *Snow White Swallows the Poisoned Apple*, 1995, Pastel on board, 170 x 150cm, (McEwen, J 2003).

The parallels continue, as with my upbringing, Rego spent time divided between two homes in the absence of both her parents. At her

grandparents she is said to have experienced a freedom that was “denied her anywhere else in her childhood” (McEwen, J 2003, pg 17).

Alternatively her aunt was bitter with life’s disappointments. Suffering from clinical depression, her aunt’s world was inwardly and outwardly consumed by darkness. Even though Rego was unhappy and repressed in her aunt’s care, her mother insisted on her obediently following the arrangement. It was probably thought that the responsibility and company of a child would provide relief from the solitude and despair that the aunt suffered. Rego’s work reflects the burden of pleasing and obeying adult suffering. She was outwardly well mannered; however, inwardly she suffered turmoil and longed to speak out. She says;

The greatest problem all my life has been the inability to speak my mind – to speak the truth. Adults were always right, never answer back, to answer back felt like death, like being in a sudden huge void. I’ll never get over this fear; so I’ve hidden in childish guises – or female guises. Little girl, pretty girl, attractive woman. Therefore the flight into storytelling. You paint to fight injustice (McEwen, J 2003, pg 212).

Creating her own fairy tales, author, printmaker and binder, Audrey Niffenegger refers to her book *Three Incestuous Sisters* as “the book of her heart”. Like Rego, each of Niffenegger’s images are based on a modern dark, fictitious autobiographical fairytale. In contrast to Rego, each series of images is returned to the traditional format of the book. This functions as a device to control the reader spatially and chronologically with the work.



Figure 22: Audrey Niffenegger, *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, 2005, (Niffenegger, A 2005).

Each of her books is fairly conventional in their format. It would seem for her that the content and not the structure of the work is paramount. The illustrations are a series of delicately executed etchings with aquatint.

Her characters are the antithesis of those found in Rego's work. They are anxious, gaunt and full of conflict and sorrow. They appear silent and self contained. While they do at times have some form of resolution, they seem to violently act out their internal turmoil. As she is one of three girls, the female characters could be her sisters. Or they may be the incarnations of the many selves that we all contain.



Figure 23: Audrey Niffenegger, *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, 2005, (Niffenegger, A 2005)

Niffenegger's own interest in books is referenced pictorially throughout her work. With themes of conflict, jealousy, death, love betrayal, anger and forgiveness, the story suggests the uneasy passage between relationships and one's own emotions. Here Niffenegger uses the metaphor *to read you like an open book*, and the story is revealed. The book becomes her body; its internal contents lie open.



Figure 24: Audrey Niffenegger, *The Wedding*, 2006, (Niffenegger, A 2006).

In *The Wedding*, from *The Adventure*, Niffenegger, the maiden is being physically held down by a number of arms that are her wedding veil. (Figure 23) A sea of eyes surrounds her like a sea of sperm. The ugly baron stands waiting. This time Niffenegger uses the symbol of the open book above her head as the head of the veil. Two of the sperm like eyes are positioned on the otherwise blank and open pages. Further into the book our heroine goes through many other metaphysical transformations. Seated in the library, the grieving outcast who is imprisoned in the body of a moth sits and consumes the books. The text reads, *All The Books Were About Napoleon; Being a moth, she ate them all* (Niffenegger, A 2006).



Figure 25: Audrey Niffenegger *All The Books Were About Napoleon; Being a moth, she ate them all*, 2006, (Niffenegger, A

This consumption of words links neatly to the consumption of religious and moral texts, or the inheritance of family histories. In the Jewish history of the book, the bible has been consumed. After reading the slate to the child, the teacher is said to have covered it with honey so that by licking the words the holy text could be assimilated (Manguel, A 1997).

Myth, fairytale, and the lived experience of the body combine with inherited stories, to contribute to the story of self. The body functions as a book requiring interaction to live and retell that story. My own experience is inseparable from the one that has been lived by the ‘other’. I am many selves at many ages. It is my experience of childhood that informs my adult self. Hiding the anxiety of my childhood manifested internally. As I grew, the disease grew.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS PURSUED

THE PHYSICALITY OF THE BOOK (IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE BODY);

The basis for this research has been to explore the ways in which the book can visually reference the body and in particular the female self. In order to do this I have researched the history of the book in relation to the body. Particularly interesting was the idea that the book functioned as a vehicle to store, reveal and conceal an inner story of an absent body. The book is a structure that is used to contain personal and cultural histories, theories and stories. It enables the knowledge of the creator to be passed on remotely, continuing the oral tradition beyond the body. 'BOOK' as an acronym can be said to stand for "Bodies Of Organised Knowledge" which binds the ideas of book and body together. I have also considered the notion that traumatic experience can manifest internally and physically emerge in the form of disease like a hidden text unfolding.

THE PROCESSES AND TECHNOLOGIES USED;

The technical development and the journal process of the work have both played as important a role in the research outcome as the individual works. Much of the research took place with experimentation, documentation and responses to these developments in skill, medium and technique. Pieces were often guided and restricted by the process and my knowledge at that time. In some cases works remained unresolved until I had done more research and gained more skills. Ideas and visual investigations took on the form of visual diaries both bound and unbound. They provide a research outcome that is equal to the finished

works. This research in technique often dictated the form of the works.
Both the subject and the practice required layering of often repetitive and laborious techniques to be used.



Figure 25: My studio space I & II

My studio space evolved to become an unbound journal. As the work developed so did the space. Like the work it slowly became red until the darkness literally surrounded me.



Figure 26: My studio space III



Figure 26: My studio space IV

My investigation studied the origins of the book and looked for parallels in its history to the female body. I analysed the physical structure and construction of books themselves, literally pulling them apart at the seams.

One of my early visual explorations involved looking closely at the structure of both the book and the body and visually exploring the similarities that I found. A series of digital images called *The Book/The Body* developed.

In his chapter "Savages" in *Excesses; Eros and Culture*, Alphonso Lingis (1984) addresses the notion of the body having a surface to be further inscribed and reinscribed by social norms, practices and values. Our bodies are an active space that can be inscribed with a history. In this visual investigation I considered this notion of revisiting and rewriting the story of my own body.

At the onset of this series I had intended to use the original digital images as journal documentation only. I experimented with a variety of photographic printmaking techniques to reproduce and respond to the images. However to keep the integrity and simplicity of the images I continually returned to a digital presentation. The original images were more suggestive of the dual quality I was seeking to convey to the viewer.

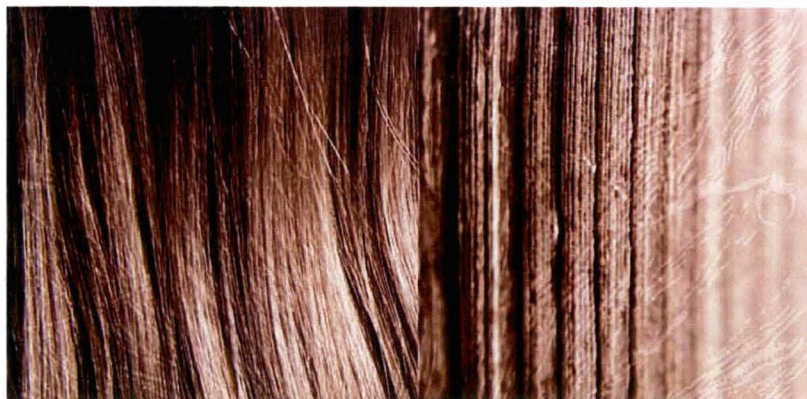


Figure 27: Leonie Oakes, *The Book/The Body Series* Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/lino print, 15cm x30cm, 2008, (Oakes, L 2008).



Figure 28: Leonie Oakes, *The Book/The Body Series*, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/lino print, 15cm x30cm, 2008, (Oakes, L 2008).

The digital images closely look at the surface of both the body and the book. I have primarily, but not exclusively used my own body. In presentation these images are paired to emphasise their material similarities. These images intentionally document and beautify the anxiety-driven, inherited and medically induced skin conditions that I have suffered throughout the project.

In his chapter in *Thinking through the Skin* (Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds) 2001), “Skin Memories”, Jay Prosser raises the seemingly contradictory notion of the skins ability to remember through marks on the surface as set in opposition with our desire to retain beautiful skin that is unmarked. ‘Given the function of skin as a visual surface to record, it is ironic that the cultural ideal of skin should be skin that forgets’(Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds) 2001, p.54). These ideas will be raised again further in this chapter when describing the *Portrait Series*.

In the work, *The Book/The Body*, details of the body are paralleled with surface blemishes (Figure 28) and age marks or decoration of the books. Details of clothing are placed next to details of covers. Scars on the skin are juxtaposed with the fold or tear in the page (Figure 29). Folds in the book echo folds in the skin.



Figure 27: Leonie Oakes, *The Book/The Body Series*, 2008 Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/lino print., (Oakes, L 2008).

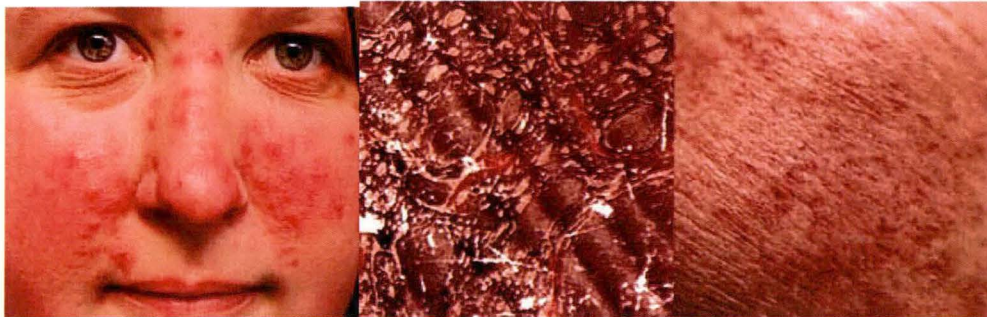


Figure 28: Leonie Oakes, snapshot of medically induced skin condition.

Figure 29: Leonie Oakes, *The Book/The Body* Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/lino print (Oakes, L 2008).

To enhance the experience of the body they were then bound into a small book to be held in the hands of the reader. As the pages turn and the light changes the texture becomes more and less apparent. The textural hives that run across the pages appear to rise from beneath the skin of the page. The book's exposed structure aims to enhance the intimate nature of the book and its seemingly fragile construction. The stitching of the spine, the use of gauze bandage and skin on the cover accentuate the material reference of the book to the body and wounding. (Figure 33)

The notion of using skin to cover books is not a new one. Of particular relevance to my research was finding that human skin and in particular female skin had been used to cover books. At the time I started the project *The Book/The Body*, I became aware of the Anthropodermic volumes that were produced in France, England and America. Examples are held in collections of libraries such as the College of Physicians of Philadelphia (Thompson, L 1946).

Although these books were usually produced from willing subjects, I found the notion of such an intimate surface being held and touched in the hands of strangers challenging but relevant to my project. The nipple, like details on the costumes mentioned in Figures 34 and 35 protrude in what appeared to me to represent brail or raised text of the body.

Throughout my visual investigation I allude to uninvited and inappropriate touch and the brass cast nipples provided me with a way to express this.

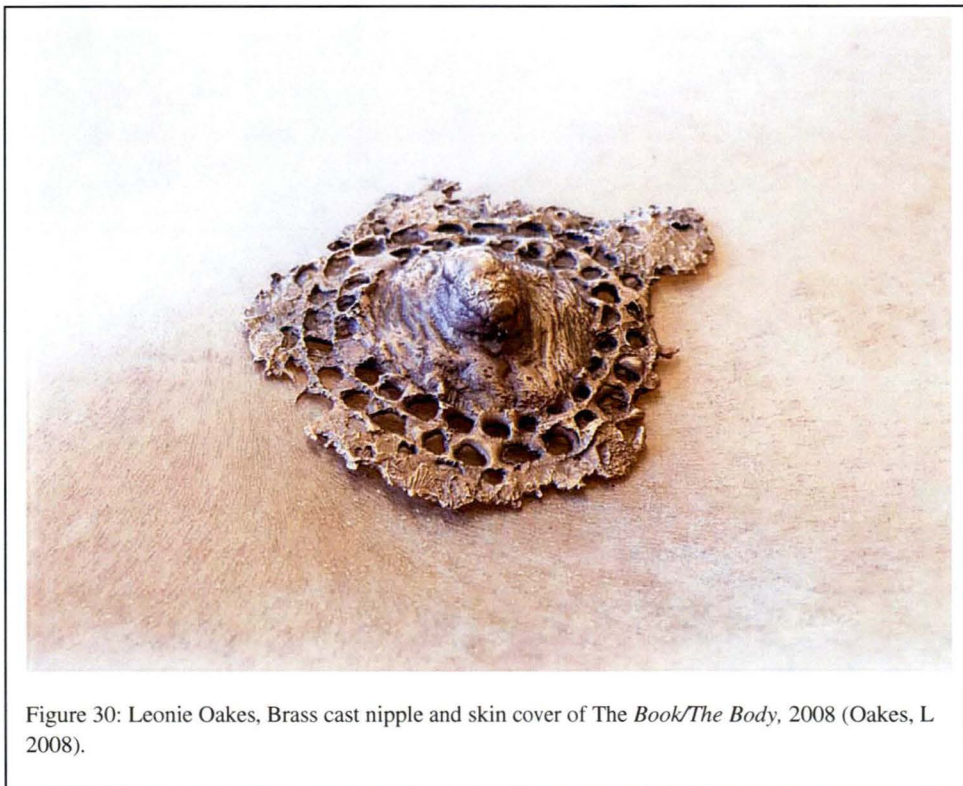
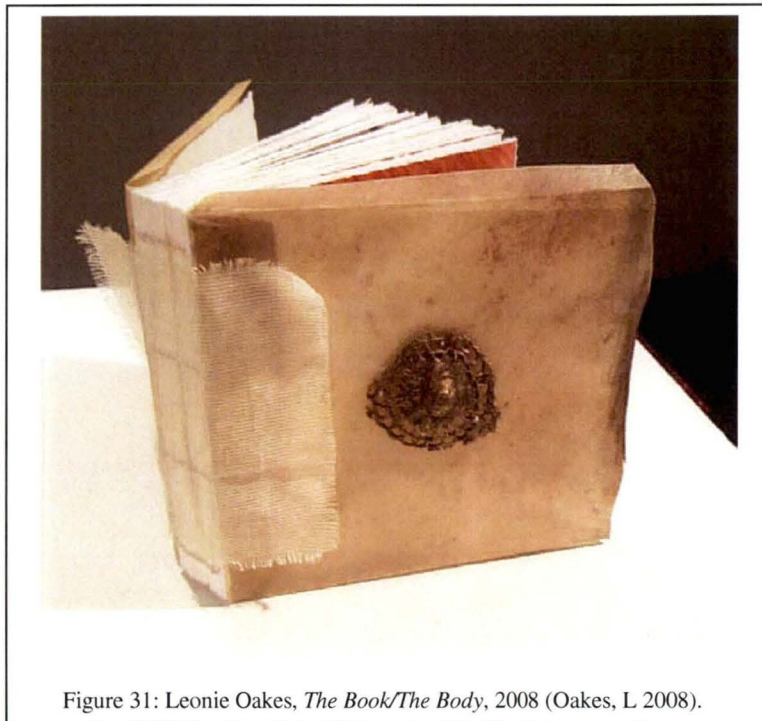


Figure 30: Leonie Oakes, Brass cast nipple and skin cover of *The Book/The Body*, 2008 (Oakes, L 2008).

Two ornate studs like nipples adorn the front and back cover of the work, *The Book/The Body*. They are representative of the ornate metal detailing that are found on some of the more elaborate photograph albums from the Victorian and Medieval periods, (See Figure 1, Chapter One). While decorative, this form of detailing was designed to protect and support the covers. My detailing mimics this function and extends the idea of invited and uninvited touch.



The inspiration for these nipples came from both the decoration on the Victorian photograph albums and from scrutinising the details of Elizabethan costuming for the Portrait Series. In the context of my project the buttons that decorate some of the costumes appeared to me like nipples.

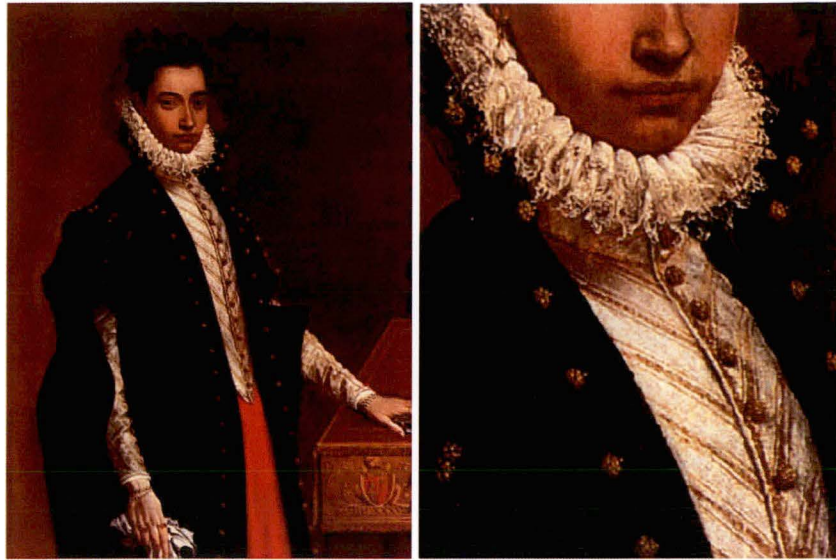


Figure 32: Ludovico Carracci (Bologna 1555-1619), above left and detail right, *Portrait of Lucrezia Bentivoglio Leoni*, (Algranti, G 2002, p.125).



Figure 33: Bartolome Gonzales (1564-1627), details left and right, *The Elder Children of King Philip III and Archduchess Margret, the Infante Philip and Infanta Anna*, 1612, oil on canvas, (Bradburne, J (ed) 2002, p.130).

Through my research I was interested to find a copy of *Merier de Compiègne's L'eloge des seins* also uses the breast of a woman for its cover with the nipple forming decoration and embellishment (Thompson, L 1946, p.99). *Justine et Juliette* by Marquis de Sade is said to have been bound in skin from female breasts (Thompson, L 1946, p.98). The 'dorsal' skin of a woman was used to bind *Tesses du ciel* by Camille Flammarion. It was the woman's desire to be bound in this way after her death, with the volume to be held in the collection of the author she admired. In a letter giving clarification of truth of this story, Flammarion describes the desire as "bizarre", but acknowledges that this 'beautiful fragment will endure centuries in a state of respectful preservation' (Thompson, L 1946, p.100).

THE COLLAR SERIES;

In exploring the notion of the book as metaphor for the body I began making collars out of deconstructed books which were designed to be worn. While originally they were intended merely as props for my photographic portraits (discussed later in this chapter) they evolved into works in their own right.

These same books of knowledge and weighty encyclopedias that were being pulled apart and photographed for their bodily details were cut and reconstructed into the first collar book to be made and worn in my first photographic portrait. At first I used the waste material to practice and broaden my bookbinding skills. My repertoire and experience were fairly narrow and traditional. In questioning what a book was to me it was necessary to expand my knowledge and practice around what a book was and how it was constructed. By literally pulling books apart at the

seams I was able to document their internal structure and challenge my technical ability.

As the series developed the collars evolved to become more sculptural. They were derived less from constructed knowledge and became more about unraveling my own inner text externally.

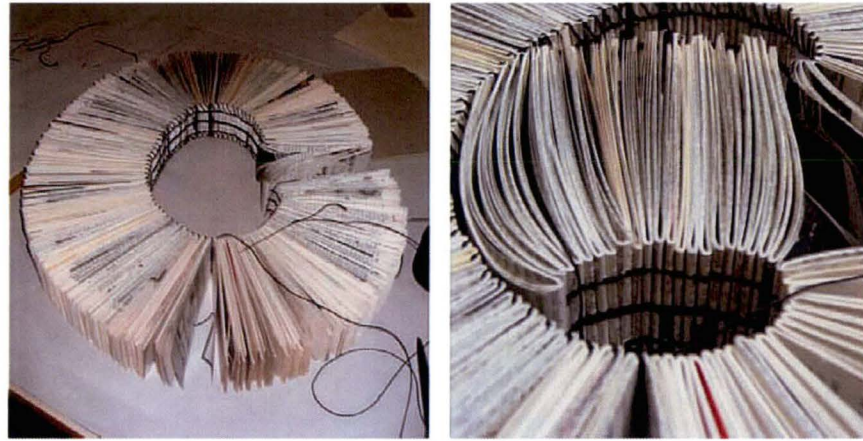


Figure 34: Leonie Oakes, *Binding Knowledge; The Collar Series*, number 2 of 35, size variable, 2005-2009, altered books (Oakes, L 2005).

In constructing these book forms I became very aware of their structure. Their initial page size was small and easy to stitch. As the length grew the position of the book against my body became difficult to hold. As much as I planned how the collars would take form they fought against me and I fought back. The book required me to regularly reposition my body and contort the work in order to continue stitching. This was a continual struggle. It became physically, emotionally, as well as culturally weighty.

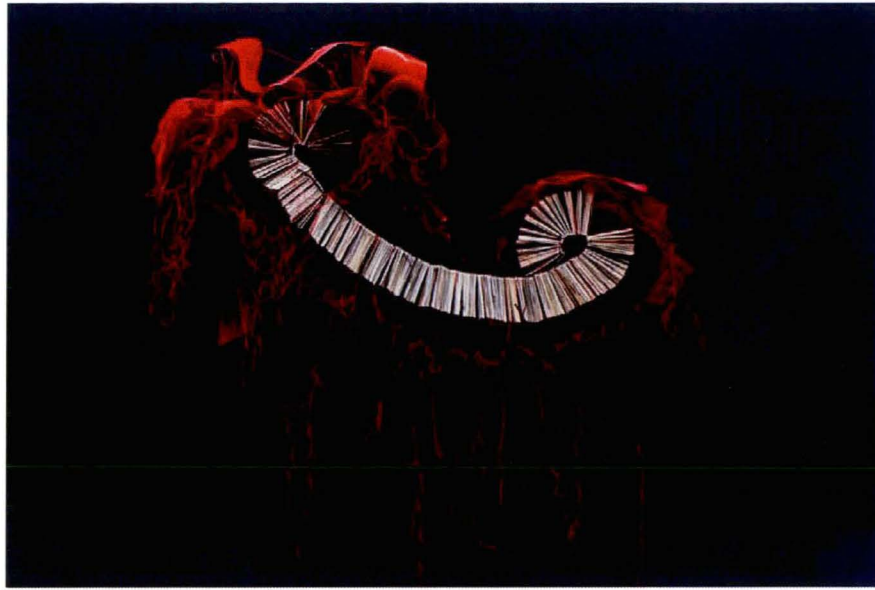


Figure 35: Leonie Oakes, *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood* from the *Collar Series*, 2008, Paper, thread, dye, (Oakes, L 2008).



Figure 36: (left); Victorian image used as source material for creating the book *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood*, *The Portrait Series* (detail).

Figure 38: (right); Leonie Oakes, *The Portrait Series*, panel 1/3, showing *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood*, 2009, being worn, work in progress. (Oakes, L 2009).



Figure 39: Leonie Oakes, *The Portrait Series*, showing *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood*, 2009, being worn, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag, etching, Nilo Plate, (Oakes, L 2009).

Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood, holds the fragmented weighty words of books of knowledge close to its exposed spine. (Figures 37- 40)
The text is worn next to the body, representing an inherited text.



Figure 37: Leonie Oakes, *The Portrait Series*, showing *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood* 2009, being worn, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag, etching, Nilo Plate (Oakes, L 2009).

The intention was to set up a dialogue about the metaphorical weight of the collar and in fact the physical struggle to produce the work

underlined this. When worn the pages tattooed the body of the model leaving an indentation on the skin. In contrast to this the outer perimeter of red pages and thread delicately spill textless. This piece seems to breathe as the tissue paper and dangling threads move echoing the physicality of the model and their body movements.

In *Darkness Surrounds Me, A Little More Lately* the inner circle of black has the same physical rigidity and weight as the previous work. However in contrast to the previous piece, it is textless. The subtle black on black printing of image forms a gestural text on the surface of the pages—it is a text of the body.

While this piece carries the performative aspects of *Falling Asleep, Tissues Fill With Blood*, it enacts this differently. Unlike previous works in the collar series, *Darkness Surrounds Me, A Little More Lately*, was produced without the intention of being worn by a model, (Figure 40) Instead it requires interaction and intimacy from a viewer to engage with the disjointed story. The pages are designed to be held in the hand. The layers suggest a darker text of violation and rupture through disturbed memories. While fragmented, with careful placement, or repeated readings the story may be revealed. The loose leaf pages literally bleed from the spine.



Some pages are heavily embossed and through the process of embossing enact violence. Other layers are more passive and conceal a text. Similarly my story is ruptured and disjointed and eludes logical retelling, a dark underlying shadow pervading the present.

Darkness Surrounds Me, A Little More Lately, sits on a plinth awaiting the interaction of a viewer/reader to participate in the story.

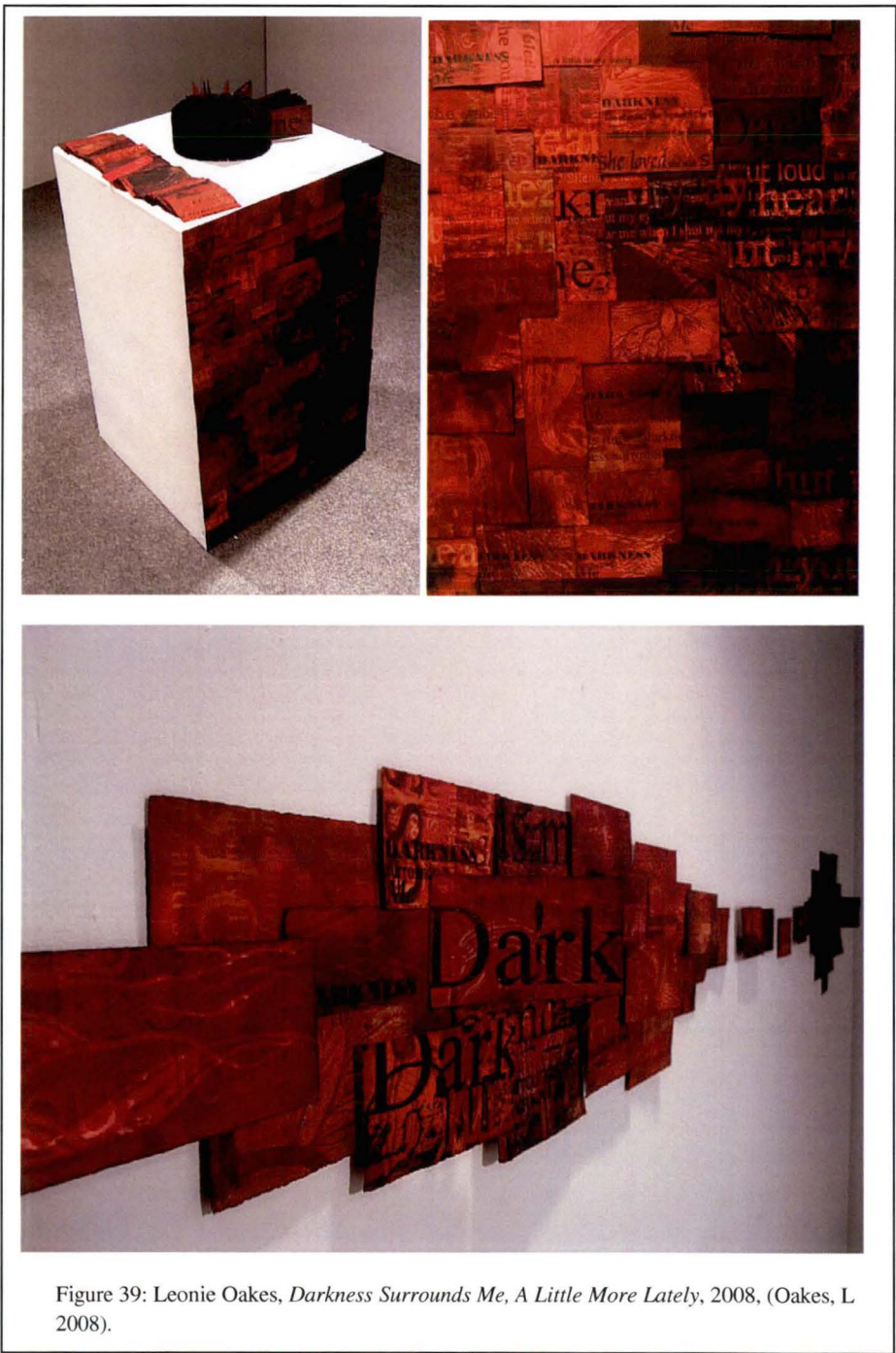


Figure 39: Leonie Oakes, *Darkness Surrounds Me, A Little More Lately*, 2008, (Oakes, L 2008).

In contrast to the previous work the intention in *She disentangled herself from the story* was to silence the work. It is bloodless, drained of life. While it does not tell a story using a written text, its fragile crumpled paper, and long dangling threads represent a silent hidden narrative.



Figure 40: Detail of cut paper (left) hand scrunched paper (middle) and sewing (right) (Oakes, L 2008).



Figure 41: Leonie Oakes, *She disentangled herself from the story*; *The Collar Series*, 2009, paper, thread, cloth (Oakes, L 2009).

The antique onion skin pages are slippery and brittle. It curled making it difficult to manage. I have learnt to manipulate this curling through tension, but at same time I found I could not always fight the parameters of the materials. Instead I had to develop the skills to work with them. I was releasing and binding in the same action. At times I was dealing with thousands of pieces of paper, meters of fabric cut and torn into tiny pieces and hundreds of meters of thread. This was combined with hundreds of hours of labour, tears of frustration and pain and a little blood as I navigated holding and binding. When the making became

habituated, I was able to stop being conscious of the action of creating and the repetitive action, became like breathing.



Figure 42: Leonie Oakes, *Silently I talk out loud/To myself/Inside my head /Can you hear me /When I shut my eyes to dream/scream?* 2008, from *The Collar Series* (Oakes, L 2008).

In *Silently I talk out loud/To myself/Inside my head /Can you hear me /When I shut my eyes to dream/scream?*, the obscure and layered text talks of the paradox of a 'loud silence' (Figure 44). It is the voice that is heard by no one but our selves. It is the silence of fear, a private thought or that of our subconscious. The work began to bleed and a personally constructed text emerges.

Consisting of a bodice collar and cuffs, this piece combines a personally constructed text with layers of relief printmaking processes, fabric, thread and ribbon. This voice contrasts the silent and hidden texts of the precious pieces. In some of the work silence is present with the absence of text. It has a very long and poetic title that informs the work. It also allows the viewer to decipher an obscure text. The strategy that I have used in naming and labelling all of my work is to reinforce the idea of narrative. The length of the titles reinforces the idea of storytelling. This text (as with many of the other texts I have used) is repeated throughout the research project. Fragments of one work can be found layered in another.

Veina Cava, means hollow vein. Given the function of the vein as a vehicle for the body to carry blood, it is ironic that the vein should be

empty. When conceiving the work I was continuing to explore the notion of text, readability and form.

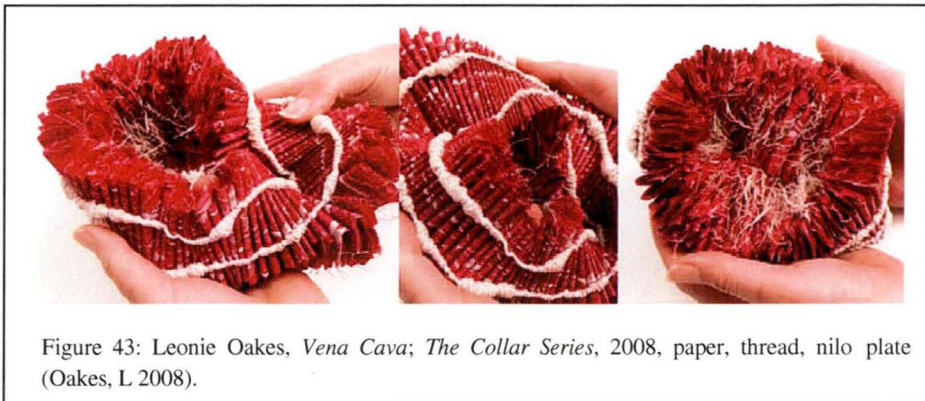


Figure 43: Leonie Oakes, *Vena Cava; The Collar Series*, 2008, paper, thread, nilo plate (Oakes, L 2008).

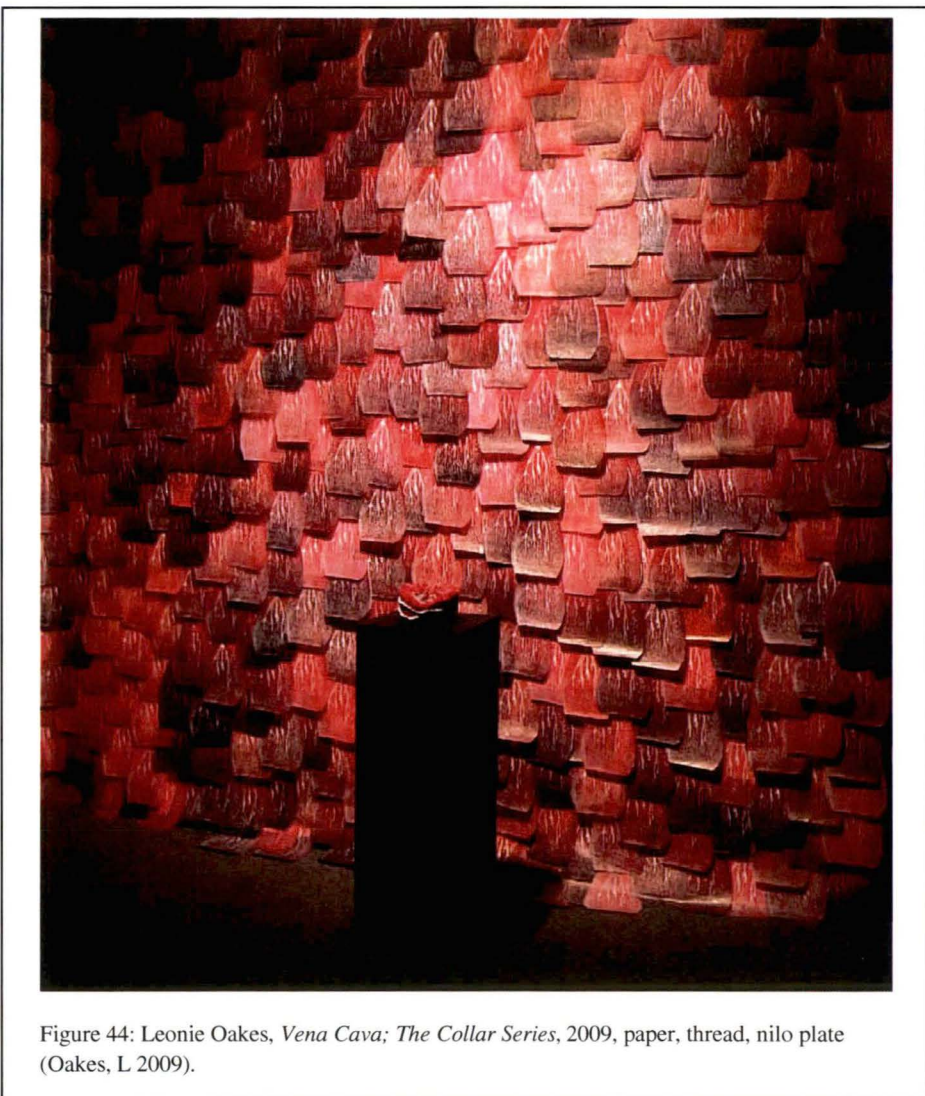


Figure 44: Leonie Oakes, *Vena Cava; The Collar Series*, 2009, paper, thread, nilo plate (Oakes, L 2009).

This collar consists of hundreds of relief printed pages. Five small pieces of paper are grouped together unevenly to create each section. There are 2400 pages. It bulging stitching around its spine resemble the swollen full veins on my mother's hands in summer. They bulge paradoxically empty. Each page has a single row of white machine stitched thread that echoes the printing and travels horizontally, like text, from the page's spine to the page's outer edge. Bound in a continuous loop this reversible book requires intimacy and interaction from the viewer. When holding the piece the viewer is faced with hundreds of tear shaped pages of breast tissue. The gentle fold around the corner wall suggests enclosure.

I consider this work to be the final piece in *The Collar Book Series*. I have mentioned the primarily wearable books in this section in order to explain the individual works and also to inform the research as a whole. The collar books feature also as wearable props in my *Portrait Series*.

THE PORTRAIT SERIES;

I began to look at Victorian and Elizabethan portraits. My collection began with a photograph of a relative I remembered seeing in my box of family photographs. The portrait is named only by the family name



Leake. She is seated with her hand placed on an open book, her eyes staring in the direction of the viewer. I searched the photograph for visual clues to solidify the stories that I had heard about her. However there were none. This image showed none of her character. Within the initial investigation of this project I was

intrigued with the notion of inheriting her story from the tales my Grandparents told and within my own body I carry her DNA.

I realised that while I inherited stories about her, the only surviving image did not inform me of any of that story. Through telling and retelling the inherited stories for me become a part of my own lived experience.

I scrutinised my growing collection of photographs of women holding book for details of their own inner stories that lay beneath the surface of their carefully constructed and posed bodies. The books that they were using as symbols were as blank as their faces. The titles are largely inscrutable.



As my collection grew she became indistinguishable from the other portraits. For me the books represent the lost stories of the people holding them, unreadable, unknowable.

As the women sat for these portraits they were individuals, but en masse they become one. I became interested in using the poses of these women to reconstruct my own portrait series (Figure 49).

These Victorian photographs were taken with exposures that required the sitter to sit still for long periods of time which often led to expressions of distance and discomfort on their faces. They were also physically held still by incredible constructions and stands that propped their bodies in position. The history of discomfort in posing for a photographic portrait in the Victorian images parallels my own bodily experience that I am narrating to the viewer. This discomfort was experienced to some extent by my sitters who at times found the costumes physically challenging and uncomfortable to wear. This physical discomfort of the sitter echoes my own physical discomfort.

As an adult my body belonged to other people. By removing my own physical body from the work I was able to remain slightly removed. I wanted people to see a story rather than me. I used this strategy to set myself back from the story and function as a narrator. I have taken portraits of myself throughout this project for my journals; however these do not express myself or the story of the work in a way that I recognise. In order to speak about moments when I was still a child or an emerging teenager, I chose models of the right age for the particular event in my development that I was visually exploring. This also gave me more freedom to explore these aspects of myself that might otherwise have been too difficult.

When describing the experience of being directed and photographed both Kylie (Figure 50) (my first model and first surrogate for self) and Janelle (the second) (Figures 51-53) describe the strange experience of being

transported into someone else. They sensed that it was not their story; I had given them direction and talked them through the photo shoot, telling them both vaguely that it was a matter of revealing and concealing a dark story. I described this darkness as both a threatening experience and at the same a space to feel safe. Monsters emerge from the darkness, and darkness can provide refuge and a safe place to hide. However, as I was not comfortable exposing a personal narrative, I had not yet told either of them it was my story that they were projecting. This was another pivotal point in my investigation. It helped to inform me 'how' I could begin to reveal the story to a viewer rather than question 'if' I could.

The initial collar and portrait session were created with the intent of existing as documentation of a wearable book. I envisaged using the photographic reference to be reworked as a potential etching or engraving at a later date. As a result the photographs were fairly rough and crude. However, I was excited by the potential of the photographs realised that they, (like the earlier work *The Book/The Body*) did not need to be taken into another process for process sake. The internal book had been externalised. At this time my levels of Photoshop skills were rudimentary and after some frustration creating the work I resorted to scissors and sticky tape to make the initial collage. Photoshop provided me with a way to alter the colour and tidy the edges into a believable but distorted figure.

The following example comes from my first photo shoot with my model Kylie. Seated, the figure is posed with a book on her lap. The position of her hands on the book and her still gaze making eye contact with the viewer both indicate that she is possibly pausing while reading.



Figure 46: Leonie Oakes, *The Portrait Series*, 2009, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/etching (Oakes, L 2009).

This is not the case as her book is blank, void of text. Its luminous quality draws the viewers' eyes to read the expected text. The large collar that decapitates her head is where the text can be found, but its pages are closed forming unreadable text. The culturally heavy text is literally weighing her down.

The next photo shoot was with Janelle. This involved a lengthy photo shoot at her house where I dressed her, painted her, and inscribed her body with text. This initial photo shoot was very spontaneous and performative. As the investigation progressed, the costumes became more involved and constructed. The photo shoots in turn became more like installations.



Figure 47: Leonie Oakes, Process images from photo shoot with Janelle, 2006, (Oakes, L 2006)



Figure 52: Leonie Oakes page from, *The Portrait Series*, 2009, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/etching/woodcut (Oakes, L 2009).

One of the photos that excited me from those photo shoots was, '*She stitched her way through silence*'. Stitching up her lips referenced the stitching of the book and the concealing of an internal text of the body rather than one of violence or protest.



Figure 48: Leonie Oakes, *She Stitched Her Way Through Silence*, 2006, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag (Oakes, L 2006).

Throughout my practice stitching acts as a visual reference for text and at times spillage. It is both binding and strong, but has the ability to be submissive and delicate. Throughout my childhood a lot of emphasis was placed on stitching and in my family and the books I was reading ‘good’ work represented a complete and productive person. Neat stitching could have been said to represent a pure heart. The laborious and repetitive action was encouraged to develop patience.

In the works in the portrait series, books are employed in many different ways. For instance, in one work the book is balanced on the model’s head. This alludes to the fact that as a child I practiced balancing books on my head to improve my poise and posture in line with the etiquette books I had read. The book is also used as a symbol throughout the work for a house, a home, a safe place to hide. In wearing the book, the models are hiding, but also seeking and creating security out of chaotic experience.



Figure 49: (detail above right), Leonie Oakes, Section of *The Portrait Series*, 2009, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/etching/Nilo Plate (Oakes, L 2009).

Combining multiple printmaking processes with some layers of the digital fine art printing also proved challenging as the paper had a tendency to stick and delaminate with the pressure. This involved experimentation with paper thickness and type, viscosity and thickness of ink, pressure of the plates on the paper, and the number of layers that the paper would hold. This development in technique has not only contributed to this project but I can see it will contribute to my practice in the future.

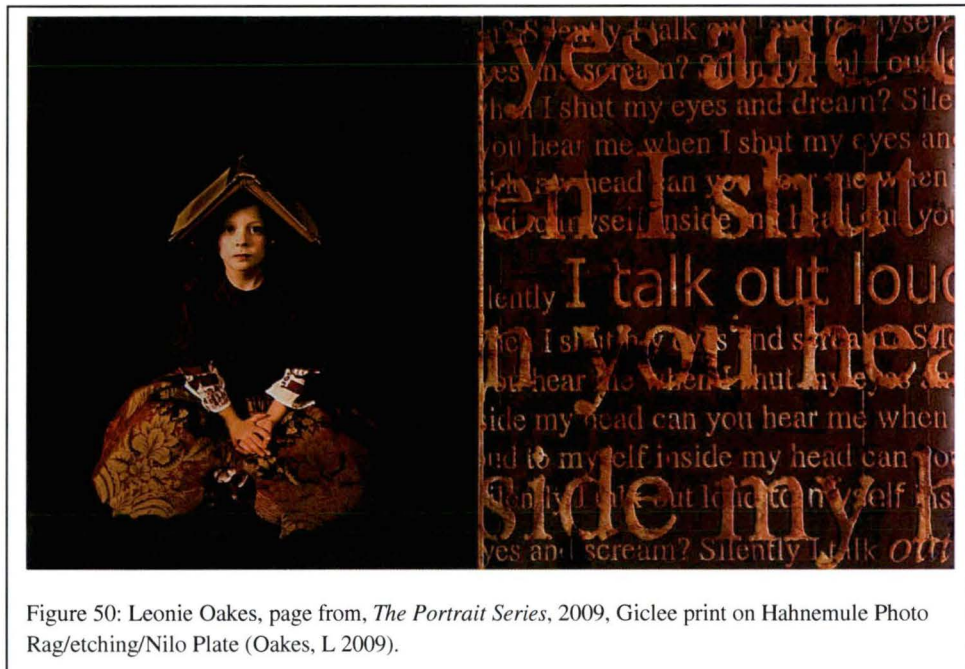
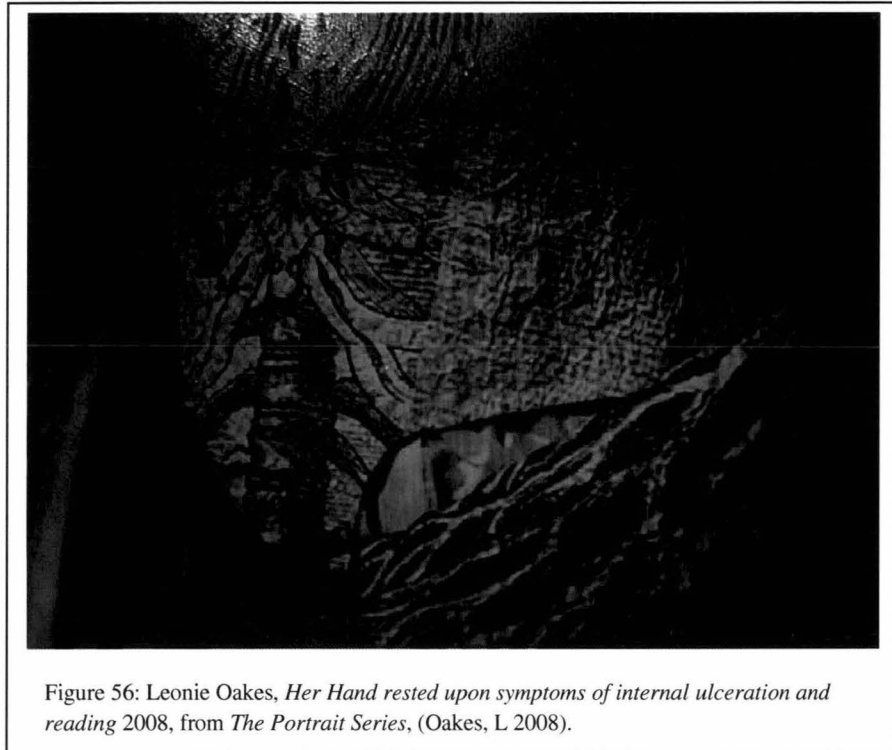


Figure 50: Leonie Oakes, page from, *The Portrait Series*, 2009, Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag/etching/Nilo Plate (Oakes, L 2009).

In the Portrait series some of the images are presented with folds or creases that refer to the book, implying bookness rather than literal symmetrical book folds. They manipulate the viewer to see parts of an image as either dominant or receding and begin to disrupt the flow of reading. They also serve to accentuate ideas about hiding and external/internal. The presentation as separate folios is linked by the idea of a whole book.

I intend that a viewer when walking through the works will see images and elements of images repeated in different pieces and in different ways. This is intended to conjure a sense of déjà vu and fragmented

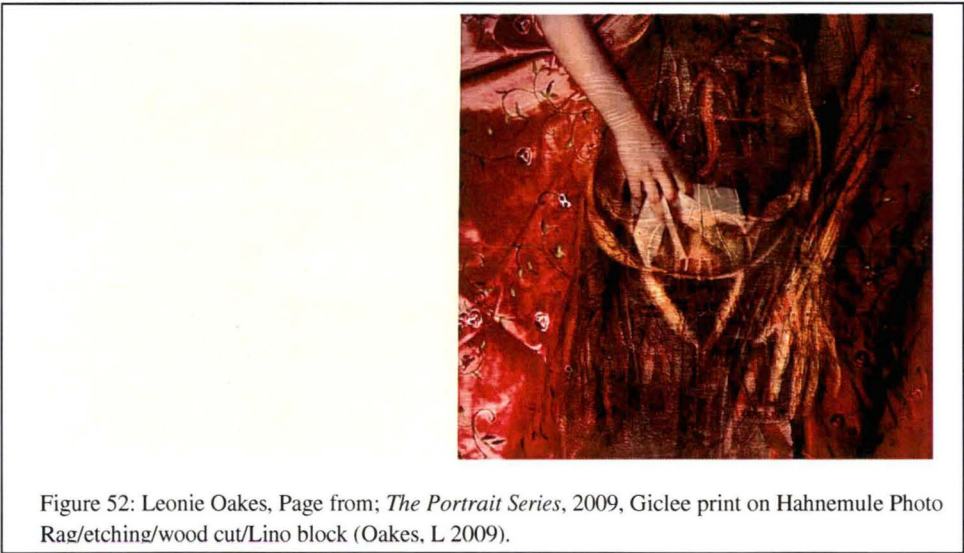
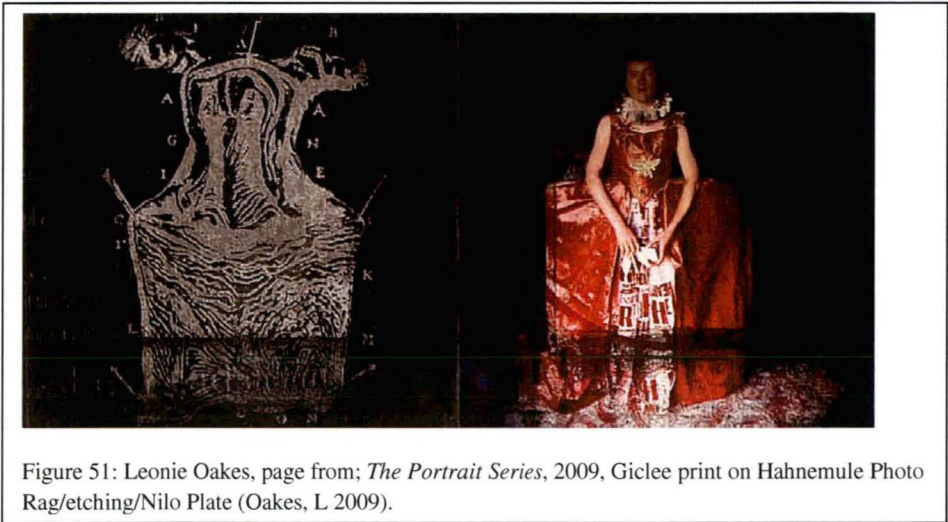
memory, sensations that I have experienced. The portraits attempt to hide an internal story, but it is also partially revealed.



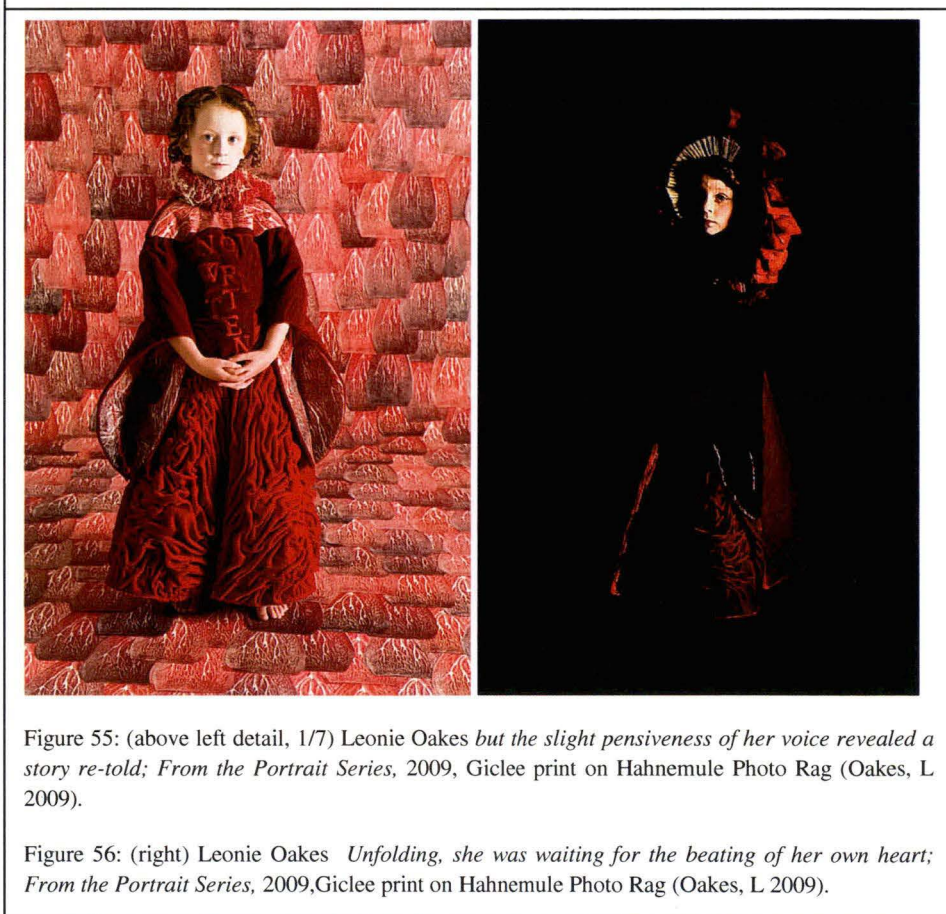
Her Hand rested upon symptoms of internal ulceration and reading, Figure 56 is an image that suggests implied physical and emotional trauma. My portraits are very still, although violent, and bodily events are implied in the images. The set of works can be viewed together or in isolation. They tell the same story and while they inform each other, they are created to function independently.

In Figure 57, a page from *The Portrait Series*, I have used an engraving I found during my honours project which is just as pertinent to my project today. On first glance the engraving appears to be a dress. It is in fact an anatomy illustration of a child splayed out in dissection. Its meaty skirt echoes the teenage figure's costume on the facing page. Both stand in darkness. The heavily embossed words 'she has, she did, she moved, she

bled, she cried...’push through the dress of the child’s’ body. The teenager stands silent.



As the project progressed, the sets and costumes that I created became increasingly elaborate and time consuming to create. I found that my reference materials of women holding books had quickly broadened to include portraits from the Elizabethan period.



I became aware of the slashing and wound-like shapes of their costumes. The internal bodily flesh can be seen in the costumes of the Elizabethan period in Figure 6, Chapter One and Figure 62. As the project became red the costume wounds were opened, conveying a bodily experience of disease and treatment. As the research developed the flesh and internal structure of the body was turned inside out.

'She sighed not saying a word, 2009' is the last work in the portrait series to be started and the first to be resolved and completed for this project. For me, this one image encapsulates all of the fragmented components of my project



Figure 59: Leonie Oakes, 2009, *She Sighed Not Saying a Word*. Giclee print on Hahnemule Photo Rag, 149cm x 166cm unframed (Oakes, L 2009).

At first glance, a strange and seemingly solitary figure stands before us. Her disproportionate eyes hold the viewer's gaze. However in the work, '*She sighed not saying a word*' there are two figures standing together, wearing components of each other's clothing. They overlap and morph to become one.

For this piece I have intentionally used two young females that have similar physical characteristics to one another. As I have mentioned previously, the physical resemblance of the models to me is irrelevant. However for this piece, the models were chosen for their similarity to each other. In order to believably morph them together to be read as one person at different ages, their physical appearance to each other was one of the first considerations.

She is wearing a book around her neck. Here it is being used as prop and symbol in a subordinate role to illustrate the metaphor and develop the idea of silent text in the portrait. The collar is very similar to the look and feel of an uncomfortable medical collar I wore for a short time as a child after some physical trauma. Although the pages are made from delicate antique paper, the density of the pages in the book combine to create a spiral that clings around the figure's neck.

Her face is painted white, as are all of the faces in my portrait series. In Eastern society the theatrical tradition of painting the face white was to detract from an individual's facial features and to neutralise their individual characteristics. In his essay, *The written face*, Roland Barthes Rothenberg, J & Clay, S (eds) 2000, p.312) explains that the painting of; "the face banishes all the signified, that is all expressivity". To paraphrase the masked is *absented*

In the Elizabethan portraits (Figure 56), the faces are painted white as a fashion symbol of youth, perfection and beauty. Ironically, the often lead based cosmetics, caused poisoning and ill health. The figure in *all of my portraits* is drained of blood. It is as if the blood has drained from

their faces and out the pages of the collar. The painted complexion in this work is a direct reference to my own loss of colour as the illness caused internal ulceration and my body became anaemic. It is also a reference to the whitening of the face as a way to express the silence of my story and the loss of face I felt as a child. Like her collar book, her face is blank and textless.

Like the Elizabethan and Victorian images I am referencing in *The Portrait Series*, the figure is adorned with and surrounded by personal symbols pertinent to the story of self.

In the costumes in the portraits that I have researched, these symbols included dragonflies, a symbol of courage, fertility, agility and renewal after hardship. At first glance my hand printed insects look pretty like the dragonfly. However, to describe my story I have used the blowfly. It is a flesh eating bug – again echoing below the surface beauty to a more grotesque story and possible reading. The blowflies I have created have an anatomical heart as the abdomen and the proboscis is the human oesophagus. Their bodies hold almost illegible miniature text that is echoed on the skirt of the teenager. It reads; *Heart, hearte, horte, hart*, referencing the flesh and meat the blowfly seeks.



Figure 57: Leonie Oakes, detail of blow fly on costume, 2008, Nilo relief print, fabric, stitch, (Oakes, L 2008).

The figure is standing surrounded by a spillage of translucent red pages. This image of the empty veins in the female breast reoccurs throughout the work. It represents a loss of blood and a hidden text that is both fading and emerging. The symbol of the female breast has multiple connotations. It stands for an inappropriate sexuality in children and also the potential to nurture life and feminine transformation from girl to woman.

This work does not attempt to deny the unavoidable reading of the transition of the child growing in a chronological sequence from one stage of life to another. Although intentionally evident, this transition is not the focus of the work. More significantly, it is about the darkness of the moment when my childhood memory of sexual trauma erupted suddenly when I was a teenager. As a young adult, certain events triggered these memories. It was the moment when emotional trauma and physical illness became one for me. I put on a happy face however, masking the moment. There is a disturbing mixture of darkness and beauty in my work.

My teenage body began experiencing a different kind of helplessness and physical trauma; not one of blossoming and growing into a woman with teenage angst, but one of fading and a sense of dying. Through the traumatic experiences of my illness, my body remembered the physical and emotional abuse that had been placed on it as a child.

The eyes of the child dominate this image. The child emerges, reminding us that the experiences of the child are the foundation for the teenager and in turn, the adult experience.

The writing that is stitched onto the layers that form the skirt of the child say; "*she sighed not saying a word*". Silence became one of my strongest coping mechanisms. Together they encapsulate that moment of stillness between the in-breath and the out-breath of the body, where

endings and beginnings merge in both directions. The story of both intertwined. In his book *Blood; Art, Power, Politics and Pathology*, James Bradburne also explores this idea. “We are born into the world of experience, but this experience is interpreted for us and to us in our interaction with it and with others” (Bradburne, J M (ed) 2002, p. 7).

At the same time, the girl in me was transforming through adolescence into a woman and the strength and coping mechanisms of the child came to the forefront. Prosser explores the notion that; “Memories can be erased from consciousness and yet retained in the unconscious...” (Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds) 2001, p.53). Of particular interest to him are Freud’s writings on the interface of inscriptive traces of memory on the skin, in the form of dermatitis, scarring and wounding. This allows for the retention of memories that have been consciously buried and are later converted to the subconscious. Prosser says that for Freud this memory may be real or imagined (Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds) 2001, p.52). Through inscription, skin has the ability to convey internal emotional trauma and physically reveal it.

For my research I am aiming to expand this notion to include chronic disease. The violence of the disease resembled the earlier violation on my body. It was for me the inward feeling of déjà vu, where the experience of the child ruptures out of the body. One violent act held inward and the other ruptured violently outward. Both required an inner strength and silence. Like me, my models were directed to be quiet, and still. They are intentionally vulnerable but strong. My child self that had lived through trauma had a great deal more strength than my teenage self. My teenage body felt powerless to fight. I suggest that skin’s memory can be burdened, as Prosser says, but also empowered with the unconscious.

“If bodies can be said to have memories, those whose bodies malfunction highlight this fact; such subjects cannot forget their bodies, but are constantly reminded of their mortality.” Prosser cites ‘certain theories of

illness (that) have located the skin as one site for the body's memory” (Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds) 2001, p.52).

The teenager in *She Sighed Not Saying a Word*, becomes part of the bookshelf that is both weighing her down and holding her up. Some of the titles include *Book of Daily wants*, *Many Thoughts of Many Minds*, *Atlas of Human Anatomy*, *Caswell's Household Guide*, and *The home Circle*. All of these refer to who she could or should be. She is wearing a book *The Girl's Own Manual* on her head. As mentioned earlier, books were also a place for me to hide and shelter.

In conclusion, throughout my works, I have utilised the potential of the multiple in print based mediums. At times this has involved printing thousands of pages of one image or multiple layers of ink on one page. It has also involved using one pictorial reference or symbol or fragment of text and repeating it in another image. This repetitive process of fragmenting text and layering image allows the viewer to slowly piece together the hidden text. Hence, the theme and the practice of my work are combined.

Throughout the timeframe of the project I have continuously taken bits of text out of books and reconstructed them again in small journals. They are a way of reflecting on both my past and present concurrently. At times when presented as image, the text is fragmented again and is not always coherent. These texts form the layers of dialogue in the pieces as seen in both the Portrait Series and The Collar Series. They have also contributed to the descriptive story based titles used to convey an internal dialogue with the viewer/reader.

CONCLUSION

In the final submission I present books as sculpture, as wearable objects, as props, as images and all as vehicles for the story of my physical and emotional traumas. Altogether, the work reveals a fragmented and broken text, giving glimpses of my past rather than a full disclosure of the actual story. The idea of book has been expanded as this submission presents the book in pieces into which the viewer enters.

I scrutinized found portraits of women holding a book, where there book the almost appeared to become a prosthesis. This performative aspect appeared secretive, intimate and yet blank and this suggested to me possibilities for telling, not their story but of the one I was projecting. I pulled apart their costumes visually and as the project proceeded details of these costumes triggered ideas for constructing my own props and costumes: Folds in fabric became bodily scars and physical slashes became wounds, buttons translated in my project as nipple braill.

The work has been created in cyclonic spiraling manner, with individual pieces responding against each other, rather than following a chronological fashion. This allowed the images, books, objects, costumes and texts to be intertwined with the aim of engaging the viewer as reader in a cohesive body of work that sits together and presents the one story.

As much as the project was about bodily experience, I was also living through a very prolonged and difficult body experience that has interrupted and stopped my research for extended times throughout the project. While detrimental to the continuity and length of time it has taken me to complete the work, it also heightened my body awareness and forced me to challenge my own sense of self. It is through this

awareness of my own body that I began to realise that in order to best articulate the bodily experience of the book, I needed to use my own story, rather than inventing a story. I had not entered into this investigation with a desire to create a work about my experience, but as the work progressed it was clear that this was integral to the project.

I did not know how much of my story I would be willing to share. I wondered how I could construct a visual story to articulate my own personal history using the symbol of the book as prosthesis without making my project a cathartic or nostalgic work. I continued to look at the physicality of the book with the new parameters of the research into the book as metaphor for the body of the female self.

The physical act of dissecting source materials echoed my bodily experience and allowed me to embed the work with what I considered to be my inherited text. This strategy of collage and layering allowed me a concrete form for representing the disease when I was struggling with how to visually present it as an experience.

I examined Elizabethan and Victorian photographic portraits of women that used the book as symbol, medical and anatomical drawings, old fashioned books on etiquette, fairy tales and revisited my family album. Employing the strategies of deconstruction and reconstruction of these books, photographs and texts has been a sophisticated development of some of my childhood pastimes. I reconfigured these sources to make a story that is more personal to myself, turning the library I was given into a library that better expresses myself.

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